

TANYA WILDE

She's a Middleton . . .

An
*Invitation To
Marriage*



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Chapter 1

Present day

The day started out like any other ordinary day. No, wait, that was not entirely true, or else this wouldn't have been a day in Holly Middleton's life, because no day in her life ever turned out as one would expect. In fact, most days often led to trouble—or at least to getting one of her siblings out of trouble—but needless to say, it ultimately meant her life was never dull. It was also why it came as no surprise that even *this* day would not turn out as expected.

This day was her wedding day.

A wedding was meant to be a day of joyous celebration, one where two souls vowed to share their lives together, usually after having fallen deeply in love. If not a love match, then it could be an arranged marriage or a required one. And yet, Holly's marriage belonged to none of the above categories. Now, if there had been an option for "accepting wedding proposals out of pure madness," she ought to have fit perfectly into *that* group.

She drew out a long-suffering sigh. Angling her head to the side, Holly studied herself in the mirror. She ought to have been thrilled, swathed in a short-sleeved gown of soft pink silk with lace trimmings and matching slippers, beautifully designed to enhance every aspect of her lean frame.

What an utter nightmare.

She didn't mean the dress, which was the height of fashion—in perhaps a too extravagant way—but her impending wedding, the wedding of doom.

Now that was a nightmare.

She was minutes away from walking down the aisle, and all Holly

wished to do was run in the opposite direction.

How had she gotten herself into this mess?

With too much enthusiasm, that's how. But then, she needn't ask such questions, for she knew exactly how: her romantic ideals.

Honestly, how could she not get drawn into the notion of a fairy-tale wedding, however sudden, when a gentleman—no, a *duke*—proposed? It was inescapable. Even if Holly had known the duke for only a day before he asked for her hand in marriage.

What hadn't occurred to her at the time was that a fairy-tale wedding did not make for a fairy-tale marriage.

It occurred to her now.

And much to her chagrin, her sisters had warned her from the start. But had she listened?

"One does not fall in love the moment a man shows interest, Holly. One must think about his motives."

"You've only known him a day, how can you be in love? How can he propose?"

All fair questions.

What a pity Holly had always been an incurable romantic. She had merely refused to listen to reason.

She thought back to that day when the duke had dropped to his knee in her cousin's drawing room and had declared, quite earnestly, that he'd known from the moment he'd caught sight of her in Hyde Park that she was perfect for him. His words had been low and urgent, so much so that her heart had melted like soft butter on a warm day.

Pure madness!

But she had no reason to believe his words insincere or his intentions suspect, what with her being the third daughter of the second son of an earl. A duke, especially one as handsome as this one, could have his pick of the litter, and he had chosen her, Holly Middleton.

He must be in love!

What ulterior motive could the man possibly possess? He had nothing to gain from their marriage but her heart. At least, that was what Holly had told herself up until two days ago. On that day the hinges that held her world together gave a decided pop when a thought entered her mind and refused to leave.

I cannot do this.

Four unshakable little words.

But, once again, like countless times before, she ignored her inner voice. Because when the eighth Duke of St. Ives, stately, wealthy and utterly devil-may-care, had asked her to marry him, Holly had, quite exuberantly, exclaimed yes, when she might have benefited more from saying no.

It was not an exclamation a lady could take back with the drop of a hat.

And as for his mother . . . Holly had never met a more self-absorbed harriidan in her life. The Dragon Duchess, as she had come to call her in private, had all but commandeered her wedding. No thought was given to the bride or her wishes. The Dragon Duchess had taken care of everything from the flowers, cake, and guest list down to the wedding gown, in the astonishing span of seven days.

All this left Holly with no choice but to go through with the wedding. One did not call off one's nuptials days beforehand, especially when said union involved a duke. And one did not run away on the day of the wedding.

It would be the worst sort of social ruin.

That was why Holly had not called it off when she discovered the true nature of her future husband two days ago.

A sense of despair churned in her belly. She recalled how she'd wanted nothing more than to stomp on the duke's well-polished boot and dash off in anger, but what then? St. Ives was not a man that would let her out of their betrothal.

"This is not the mood I envisioned for my wedding day," she muttered, turning away from the mirror.

The duke had misled her. *Duped* her.

He had not been overcome with affection or feelings of grandeur when they'd met that day in the park. He was *not* the gentleman he had pretended to be when he had proposed. And he certainly hadn't fallen madly in love with her.

Holly paced the length of the vestry as she waited for the ceremony to commence. By now everyone would have taken their seats, and her father would soon arrive to relinquish his rights over her to the stuffy Duke of St. Ives.

What was she going to do?

Marry the duke, that's what.

Anything but that.

You'll be a duchess, her inner self pointed out.

Oh, do be quiet. Yes, Holly would become a duchess, but what did that matter when she'd also be a slave?

The door cracked open and Willow slipped into the room.

Oh, Lord, was it time?

Holly held her breath. She had asked for a few moments to herself, mostly to calm the rising panic threatening to overcome all other senses but also to convince herself of the practical benefits of becoming a duchess.

Which she had yet to do.

Her time had run out.

"They will be ready in . . ." Her sister started, pausing when their eyes locked.

Holly knew what Willow saw; she had just seen it in the mirror. Her eyes were wide and her complexion pale, much paler than usual. Also, pearls of moisture had formed on her brow. In fact, Holly wouldn't be surprised if an invisible fairy had painted the word *petrified* in bright red across her face since she'd turned from the mirror to pace.

"Heavens, Holly! You look as though you've encountered a ghost. What's wrong?"

Everything.

She parted her lips to reply, but to her horror, all that escaped was a light croak.

"Good lord!" Willow exclaimed, rushing forward. "Are you all right?"

Holly lifted her eyes to meet her sister's worried gaze. Her sense of panic only grew. "What have I done?" she managed in a half whisper, half cry.

"Nothing that cannot be put to rights. You don't have to go through with the wedding if you don't wish it." Willow's face was a mask of determination.

"I'd be jilting a *duke*."

"You'd be escaping a man with ulterior motives," Willow countered. "Everyone will understand."

Holly raised a thin blond brow. No one would understand. And while Willow's concern was touching, Holly would be ruined, and the taint of that scandal would leave a stain on her sisters as well. And even if that hadn't been enough to give Holly pause, there remained no doubt in her mind that the duke's wrath would follow her to the ends of the earth.

She shook her head, her lips touched with a sad smile. "If I humiliate St. Ives before his peers, I'd be a social outcast, which would mostly be fine, but I'll not be the cause of you and Poppy's reputations being muddled as well. There is nothing for it, Willow. I made a terrible mistake, and now I must live with the consequence. I'd die before I ruin your chances to marry fine gentlemen."

Willow's shoulders squared. "I would rather you be happy than miserable for your entire life. We can overcome the scandal, even if society will not forgive."

"We will be exiled to the country for the rest of our lives."

"We already live in the country, Holly, and besides, Middletons have never shied away from a bit of scandal."

"It's not as simple as that. What of father? Our cousins? They will also be affected by the *explosion* of scandal I'd cause if I jilt St. Ives."

Willow bit her lip.

So this was it, Holly thought. There were some mistakes where the only way out was through. This was one of those times. But it was hard to accept that the entire sum of her life had brought her to this moment.

“Let me do it.”

Holly looked up, horrified. “Are you mad?”

“Completely. A Middleton trait, as you are well aware. However, the duke ought to be taught a lesson, and who better to teach him than me?”

“And this requires you to marry him?”

“It would certainly solve the problem.”

“No,” Holly said, asserting her answer with a sharp shake of her head. “This is my mistake, Willow, not yours. I cannot in good sense allow you to take my place in misery.”

Oh, but how easy it would be to flee the scene of her wedding!

Her sister stepped forward, gripping her by the shoulders, her eyes solemn. “It’s not your fault, Holly. St. Ives took advantage of your trusting nature. I am certain of it. Let me do this for you.”

Holly shook her head.

No. Absolutely not.

Still, her sister pressed, “I’m not as easily taken in by romance as you, and I do not believe love is a prerequisite for marriage. While it would be nice—do not get me wrong—it’s not needed to make a good match. And to marry a duke, to become a duchess . . . that is as good as it gets.”

“This is absurd, Willow. I cannot let you take my place. You do not know the duke. He is dreadfully domineering and has all these ridiculous rules his duchess must obey.”

“I can handle one duke.”

Holly’s heart pinched. “But he’s not your burden to bear. And even if we could find a way to fool the duke, how am I to live with myself knowing you took my place in a life that will bring you nothing but misery?”

“We don’t need to fool the duke...much. We only require the vows to be said. After my veil is lifted and the duke discovers our ruse, it will be too late.”

“Willow,” Holly murmured, attempting to talk some sense into her sister. “Do you not understand? The duke’s a tyrant. He compiled a list of rules for me to abide by. *Rules!* It is unheard of! Better it be me than you.”

Willow’s eyes narrowed and her lips pulled into a thin line. “What sort of barbarian is he?”

“The kind that insists I am to be in bed promptly at eleven when we are not attending assemblies and one hour after we’ve returned home

on nights that we do.”

“That’s just preposterous!” Willow exclaimed.

“I’m also allowed only one slice of toast for breakfast.” That was, perhaps, the cruelest rule of all.

“Barbaric! You shall not marry that lout,” Willow declared, her back straightening.

“But what of the scandal?”

Willow’s expression turned fierce. “We will ride out the storm together, and may this act of rebellion serve as a lesson to the infernal Duke of St. Ives.”

Holly remained unconvinced.

A knock on the door sounded, causing both women to jump, followed by the low rumble of a male voice. “Miss Middleton? Are you present?”

Holly’s eyes flew to her sister, who prompted her to answer.

“Of course, your grace, where else would I be?”

Willow shot her a warning look.

What? Holly mouthed.

Silence followed from behind the door. Then a grunt. “The ceremony will commence in promptly four minutes.”

Right.

“I shall be there.”

This time, Willow flitted her eyes heavenward.

However, there was not a single remark from the duke before the thudding of his footsteps pronounced his retreat.

“I simply cannot marry that man!” Holly burst out, the words erupting from deep within like lava from a long-slumbering volcano.

“And you won’t,” her sister agreed. “We shall leave a note with the wedding dress he purchased for you.”

“The Dragon Duchess purchased it,” Holly muttered.

“From his pockets, no doubt,” Willow said, wasting no time to assist Holly out of the gown.

Any minute now, a knock on the door would signal her father’s arrival. She quickly undressed and hung the gown up against the wall, leaving her clad in nothing but a provocative corset-like chemise, a gift from her cousin Belle. Holly was quite confident that had the Dragon Duchess discovered the creation, it would have ended up in the Thames.

“Go!” Willow exclaimed.

“What of you?”

“I shall pen the note and receive father, but you cannot be here, or it shall all be for naught.”

“There might be guests milling about!”

“The duchess has ordered everyone to their seats.”

Of course she had. Still . . .

“I cannot leave the church looking like Satan’s prostitute!”

At once Willow removed her shawl and handed it to Holly. “Here, cover your face with this. So long as no one recognizes you as the bride, you ought to be fine.”

Holly nodded and wrapped the shawl around her head, sprinting from the room in haste. How fortunate that the wrap was royal blue instead of damning red, which Holly was sure resembled the fires of hell.

Once clear of the vestry, she plastered herself against the wall, taking stock of her surroundings. To her left lay the way to matrimony. Hundreds of people from all over the country—friends, family, and strangers—sat gathered there, waiting for her.

Lord, forgive me.

To her right lay the way to freedom. Ah, the sweet, crisp taste of bliss that would lift the weight crushing her shoulders. Holly inched closer in that direction.

There was no way of knowing whether some of the wedding guests had ducked outside for a spot of fresh air, but other people would be milling about: merchants, servants, ladies, gentlemen . . . all about to witness her grand escape.

The sudden low-pitched notes of oncoming voices, perhaps three, signaled men heading her way.

Holly’s head throbbed at the temples. She could not be discovered like this. She must do something. Anything.

Dashing across the hall to the nearest door, she turned the latch, and groaned. It was locked.

Her panic welling, Holly plastered herself once more against the wall, her mind racing for a possible retreat, when the wooden panel at her back suddenly gave way. With a cry of alarm, she tumbled into a hidden passage, her backside hitting the ground with a clear *oomph*.

“Did you hear that?” A low, unfamiliar male voice asked.

Holly scrambled to her feet to shut the panel before anyone noticed a hole in the wall and, heaven forbid, caught her mid-escape.

How utterly remarkable her luck!

Feeling her spirits rise once more, she glanced around the hidden room. The space was narrow, but it appeared to be of considerable length, almost like a secret hallway. In fact, as her eyes adjusted to the darkness, Holly noted it might run half the span of the church.

Candles, robes, and books were stacked against the inner wall, giving the room a musky smell. And if it hadn’t been for the tiny holes of light pouring through the thin outer layer, the space would be shrouded in darkness.

What was this place?

Out of curiosity, Holly trailed the length of the passageway, noting all the scrolls and wooden chests, until muffled voices drew her attention away. Following the sound of chatter, she soon came up to the end of the hidden hallway.

Her eyes darted around the barren space. There was nothing there, except what looked to be a vent for air and, beside it . . . peeping holes?

What was the meaning of this?

A thought struck her.

Lord Almighty! Peeping holes were used to spy, were they not? But why would the church have any need for them?

Curiosity burned inside her.

She ought to leave. But how often did one find oneself in a secret passageway shrouded in mystery?

Holly couldn't leave if she tried.

Spying a small footstool in the corner, she placed it just beneath the holes. Still, she had to lift onto her toes to peek through them.

The holes gave her a complete view of the altar and . . . the wedding ceremony.

Her heart sank.

Even from where she spied, Holly observed the poor unsuspecting devil positioned beside the priest glance at his pocket watch with a darkening scowl.

Oh! The last thing she wanted to do was bear witness to her own folly. Now, because her gaze refused to be drawn away from the impending catastrophe, she would have a first account of the moment her husband-not-to-be grasped he'd been abandoned at the altar.

In fact, any moment now, realization would strike.

Her heart in her throat, she spotted Poppy glancing worriedly down the aisle. Her cousin Belle sat beside her husband and brothers, all waiting in anticipation for the bride to make her dazzling entrance.

Another nightmare!

It was hard to imagine which was worse: going through with the wedding or not going through with it at all. Either way, it was too late to debate the merits now.

Holly's thoughts were interrupted when the church organ struck up the melody of the wedding march. Unable to take the suspense, to watch the mutiny she was responsible for, she shut her eyes. Tight. The whispers would start any moment, the thumping of boots as the duke marched down the aisle in furious pursuit of his runaway bride soon to follow.

She waited.

And waited.

But no running boots signaled a furious duke.

No whispers of shocked onlookers reached her ears.

Only the rustling of people rising.

Holly opened one eye.

And gaped.

There, adorned in her wedding dress of soft pink silk, a figure sauntered down the aisle, an elegantly crafted veil of matching color hiding her features.

Her other eye shot open.

Several guests were wide-eyed and stared at the bride in shock. Or were they staring at her feet—Holly couldn't be sure.

Had she fallen and hit her head?

But sure enough, even after Holly pinched her arm and bit the inside of her cheek, the figure still moved down the aisle.

Her gaze flicked to the duke, who stood ramrod straight and indifferent, his eyes only fleetingly sweeping the bride from head to toe, and Poppy...oh, Poppy! Her older sister was frowning, not in suspicion but rather in confusion. She must be wondering what had happened to Willow, Holly thought.

Willow.

With a gasp, Holly inspected every small detail of the bride. Could it be? The dress fit adequately enough, but Holly knew Willow was slightly taller than she was.

Her gaze dropped to the bride's feet. The gown stopped just above the ankles, displaying a remarkable amount of skin—and shockingly blue slippers.

Oh, dear Lord!

They were the same color as the shawl Willow had given her.

Studying the figure, Holly noted the soft blond hair, just like her sister's, more strawberry colored than her own. Poppy noticed it about the same time as she did, for Holly noted from the corner of her eye that her sister's jaw dropped. God bless her, she recovered before anyone could take note. Lucky for them, all eyes were on the bride. Or rather, her ankles.

Frozen with the knowledge and dread of what Willow was entering, Holly willed her sister to turn and run. This had to be some terrible trick. Why else would Willow take her place after Holly had warned her?

Fear crept up her spine. She should never have left without her sister.

The duke waited, entirely unsuspecting, for his bride to reach his side. He stood, proud and unshakable, with nothing but a small stretch of his lips, watching her sister stroll down the aisle.

For the first time Holly noted the sheer number of guests in attendance. Since she hadn't been privy to the arrangements, courtesy

of the Dragon Duchess, she had not considered the wedding to be such a big event.

Curses! The entire town would know within the hour that the Duke of St. Ives had married the wrong sister. Served the handsome devil right to be duped, but not at the expense of Willow. If only she had heeded Willow and Poppy's advice, she would not be peeping—

"What on God's green earth are you doing?" A voice boomed from behind her, and Holly whirled, her feet slipping from the footstool.

Time suspended as she fell to the floor.

Long, strong arms shot out and caught her by the waist, and Holly was hauled against a broad chest. Her astonished gaze locked with the stark white of a cravat, while the rich scent of sandalwood teased her nostrils.

Lord, the man smelled good.

Just as fast, she was set back on her feet, where she found herself gazing up, and up, and up into the surly eyes of an imposing figure.

Holly stood frozen, held immobile by the thunderous twin icebergs as she heard a hush fall over the church. Even the church organ had missed a dramatic note as the deep male voice reverberated through the thin wall that separated them from the congregation.

In hindsight, Holly ought to have known her efforts to escape would have the same result as a dog barking at a knot. And if she knew anything about the man who had just caught her, it was that the devil had a wicked sense of humor indeed.

Chapter 2

Nine days ago

Ever since Holly Middleton had been a little girl, she'd dreamt of a grand wedding, the kind of wedding that would be on the lips of the whole of Britain, even the royal house. No detail had been overlooked, from the flowers and the breakfast spread to the style of her wedding cake. The dress, though Holly had yet to decide on a design, would surely be the stuff of envy and copied by all who desired to be fashionable. She had always loved gold, lace trimmings, and purple peonies.

But that was not what occupied Holly's thoughts as she strolled through Hyde Park with her sisters in tow. At that precise moment Holly wondered whether this would be the year she found lasting love.

As a child, she would fall in love every day with someone or something new. She'd even fallen in love with the notion of falling in love. Her mind never lacked imagination, from dreaming of wedding a prince, to a brawny Scotsman, to falling in love with the vicar's son the next day. Later another notion would inevitably capture her heart—falling in love with a pirate, perhaps. Other times she would fall in love with a lyric or a poem.

Never had any of those affections lasted.

But Holly held out hope that one day she would meet a man that would cast such a glorious spell over her senses that no obstacle could snap the tether that bound them. And she would know he was the man she'd been dreaming of her entire life.

So she decided at a young age that her future groom would be handsome, strong, a bit dangerous and, most importantly, madly in

love with her.

Would he be a prince? Maybe. A pirate? Perhaps not. A detective? Not out of the realm of possibilities. A playwright? Would that not be smashing? A duke? For all one knew!

Needless to say, theirs would be a courtship of adventure and magic. In her daydreaming, she and her perfect gentleman would meet on a clear midnight to lie beneath the sky and stare up at the stars, sharing their deepest fears and grandest dreams.

He'd indulge her puffing on a cigar now and then, however improper it was, accepting that she enjoyed the taste. Together they would walk hand in hand through the countryside, making fun of passersby, and every so often they'd take naked dips in the sea. On colder days they'd snuggle up before a fire and read to each other from their favorite books. It would be the perfect courtship and a prelude to the perfect marriage.

The only thing Holly hadn't known about her future wedding was the identity of the groom.

Which was all about to change.

In the center of Hyde Park.

Holly spotted him seated upon a giant chestnut horse—a figure to behold even from afar. He was conversing with another gentleman, nodding at something his companion said, when—without warning—he turned his head and their eyes locked.

The earth shifted beneath her feet.

By Jupiter!

The man was tall and wickedly handsome.

His was the kind of face that made a woman stop dead in her tracks to admire his beauty. Even the way he sat atop his thoroughbred appealed to her inner romantic. Such sturdy thighs would most certainly carry her up a flight of stairs! Though it was impossible to notice much else with his gaze holding her own.

Then he did something Holly could never have imagined. He turned his thoroughbred in her direction, sent her a bright smile, and tipped his hat in greeting.

Sweet Mary!

The daydreaming flared up almost instantly.

Soft lips kissing.

Purple peonies.

Golden silk.

A magical garden setting.

She did not think the moment could be more perfect. And then the gentleman urged his horse forward.

Two days ago

In the back of Holly's mind, she knew the moment felt all wrong. Though *wrong* did not seem to justify what she felt as she watched the duke gesture to three sheets of paper with his forefinger. He was imparting something to her, something he considered necessary; she could tell because his lips were moving and his eyes unsmiling, but all Holly heard was the dreadful crackle of her charred dreams.

This was not how it should be.

What began six days ago as a feeling of disappointment and anger over the Dragon Duchess commandeering her wedding was quickly steamrolling into something else. Call it a grasp of instinct or the sharp blade of self-preservation, but Holly's innards were suddenly clenching in protest at donning the title *Duchess of St. Ives*.

I cannot do this.

The softly whispered words in the back of her mind taunted her. She was mad—insane. Why else would she agree to marry a man the day after she'd met him? Why else would she agree to be wed in just eight short days after that? Why else would she stand idly by while they disregarded her ideas?

But the answer was clear. In her ascent into the puffy clouds of love, she would have agreed to fly to the moon on the back of a seagull. She had always been that way. Which made the next moment so much more bitter than sweet.

The duke handed her the three-page set of—she quickly glanced over the top sheet—rules? At a loss, her bewildered gaze flicked to his, but he remained silent, his hands locked together behind his back, scrutinizing her.

Not sure how to proceed, she flicked through the sheets, dumbfounded at the content that would dictate their marriage.

Sweet Mary.

With one deceptively hopeful word—yes—she had sold herself to a life of slavery? A life dictated by a domineering clod?

“But this is ridiculous,” she said, her eyes lifting to meet his. “How can you expect me to eat only one slice of toast in the morning? I love toast. I eat at least three slices!”

He pointed to the line just beneath that preposterous rule.

“That is only for breakfast. You will have more than enough food to sustain you throughout the day.”

Holly stared at him without blinking, aghast. Surely he did not mean it? But the vacant look in his dark eyes told her he intended precisely that.

Her brows knitted together, her eyes flicking between the paper and

him.

“Do you follow the same eating restrictions?”

He shook his head. “I am a man and not as frail.”

I beg your pardon?

“I will have you know I’m as sturdy as any country miss!”

He dismissed her comment with the wave of his hand.

“Nevertheless, the rules are there for a reason.”

To starve her!

“What happens if I fail to comply with them?”

His brows scrunched together. “Why would you?”

Obviously, the man did not know her at all. But then, they had not even been acquainted for a full fortnight. Would she have agreed to marry a pirate on such short acquaintance? No. Why should a duke be any different?

“But if I don’t,” she pressed.

He shrugged. “If you feel you must break your marriage vow to obey me, you will be punished.”

“You would punish your wife?” Holly could not keep the note of wonder from her voice.

Honestly, punishment seemed a tad dramatic.

Children were punished.

Adults were not.

Again he shrugged. “A relative term—you will lose some if not all of your perks of being my duchess.”

Holly stared at St. Ives, who stood undaunted and entirely in earnest, trying to recall the exact quality that had drawn her to him. As she held his gaze now, he was not all that appealing. Of course, the man remained wickedly handsome, and his superior air of elegance was hard to dismiss. But on closer inspection, much closer, Holly noted an emptiness in him that hadn’t been there before, a look that told her he felt no emotion for her or their upcoming nuptials. Which made her wonder, was she just some means to an end?

“You made me believe you loved me,” Holly said with all the horror she felt at that moment. “You deceived me.”

The accusation seemed to catch him off guard.

He blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“You said the moment you saw me you knew I was perfect. You said all those things, and like a starved fool I consumed your every word.”

Surprise entered his gaze, and then his features hardened to granite, the only other emotion Holly had glimpsed since she had said, quite naively, yes. Displeasure darkened his features.

“Does it matter?” he asked.

“Yes.”

His teeth clenched before those blank eyes narrowed. They studied

her, most likely assessing what to reveal and what to keep hidden.

Holly felt like a fool.

“The day we met in Hyde Park I noticed an air of eagerness about you. I’m in urgent want of a wife, and you, for all your faults, were desperate to fall in love. You were the perfect candidate.” He paused. “I never lied to you.”

His words slammed into her with enough force to rob her of any breath. By Jupiter! In one sentence he had managed to call her *perfect* by being desperate and eager.

Horror washed over her.

“How could you deceive me like this?” she croaked out.

“At most I charmed you, Miss Middleton. The rest, well—you just conjured the illusion that you wanted.”

Had she? Was this her fault? Still, she felt the need to ask, “So you do not love me?”

“Madam, love is for the small-minded. I am a duke. There is no room in my life for such feeble emotions.”

Holly took a step away from him. How had she missed this? How had she not noticed the arrogant set of his jaw, the steel that was so well masked in his gaze? Her blindness to this man defied explanation.

It was the eighth day of their acquaintance. It was also the day Holly Middleton fell hopelessly *out* of love with the Duke of St. Ives.

Chapter 3

Present day

Brahm Tremont, the sixth Marquis of Warton, watched as a slight figure darted out of the vestry with an unmistakable sense of urgency. Tilting his head, he found her actions curious: plastering her back against the wall, glancing wildly around, dashing to the nearest door, discovering it locked, plastering her back against the wall again. All this while clad in nothing but a chemise, her face partially concealed by a pretty piece of cloth.

Nevertheless, he recognized her instantly.

Holly Middleton.

The bride.

The chit had managed to snatch a duke. It was quite the advancement from being a silly girl to attracting the attention of the most sought-after bachelor in England. Indeed, Brahm recalled only too well a time when she had chased after him in a ballroom, shouting his name for all of Christendom to hear. Thankfully, her attention had been an attempt to distract him from his sister's mad scheming. But in what must have been the most paralyzing moment of his life, he'd believed Holly Middleton was on the hunt for a husband and had set her cap at him.

Now he was ready to wish Miss Middleton and St. Ives all the luck in their marriage, except he couldn't understand why Miss Middleton was creeping down the hallway of the church.

He glanced at his pocket watch.

The wedding should be starting right about now. All the other guests were seated, but Brahm was late. Of course, he had intentionally arrived tardy because he loathed weddings, which was

why he had taken his time smoking his cheroot outside and delaying the inevitable. No need to suffer through the eye batting and coy smiles of every unattached lady in his vicinity more than he had to.

His shoulders flexed to uncoil the tension gripping him there. If there had been any way to dispense with attending the wedding entirely, Brahm would have. He claimed no friendship with St. Ives or the bride. Unfortunately, his sister did, and that was all the connection needed.

Trouble always lingered in a woman's wake, as was again evident in the mysterious actions of Miss Middleton, who still stood plastered against the wall. Then she disappeared.

Into thin air.

Just . . . *poof*.

Brahm blinked. Surely she had not just become invisible? But there was no sign of a door. One moment she had been pressed up against the wall, and the next . . . He wondered if perhaps there had been something other than tobacco mixed within his cheroot. Had he just imagined Holly Middleton running around half naked?

Before he could determine his sanity, another movement caught his eye. This time it was a woman clad in a wedding dress.

Brahm shook his head.

Surely *that* wasn't Holly Middleton? He couldn't tell, not through the veil. But her skirt was too short, revealing a generous amount of skin, more so with each step. He watched as she paused and inhaled a deep breath, smoothing out any wrinkles in her gown with her palms.

Brahm scowled in her direction.

Something very Middleton-esque was going on here.

Could that trio never behave?

He waited for this Middleton to move away from him before he set out to the space where he witnessed Holly Middleton disappear. He halted at the same spot, more or less, and pressed his back against the wall, just as she had. Seconds later the wall gave way to a hidden passage.

One corner of his mouth quirked up.

He hadn't imagined things after all. Which begged the question, just how had the little conniving creature known this secret panel existed?

Mindful of being as silent as possible, he shut the panel and followed the path, glad for the cracks of light filtering through the wooden wall. And there appeared to be no sign of rats. He hated rats—almost as much as he loathed such tight spaces.

Brahm hadn't quite known what to expect after following her through the secret panel. Certainly not Miss Middleton perched precariously on a footstool, peeking through two holes.

Though he shouldn't have been surprised.

Still, even with his annoyance over being the one burdened to discover whatever this latest scheme was, he couldn't stop his lungs from constricting as his gaze followed the outline of her flimsy garment until his eyes finally stopped at her posterior.

Brahm felt the ground give way under him.

What in the blazes?

This was *Holly Middleton*.

Not an angelic temptress.

He had no business noting her derriere or the way the skirt attached to her corset clung to her hips, enticing him to . . .

Brahm cursed.

He had never held any favor for the Middletons, mostly because they stirred up headaches wherever they went, and he sure as hell had no business suddenly lusting after one, especially one supposed to be betrothed.

Displeasure swiftly replaced any forbidden woolgathering. These desires were simply not to be borne, and neither was whatever trouble Holly Middleton was in the midst of creating.

"What on God's green earth are you doing?" he boomed.

Miss Middleton whirled, losing her balance and toppling over.

Brahm shot forward, catching her in his arms, her soft body pressing up against him, melting away some of his annoyance.

At the same time, the full-toned resonance of his voice echoed throughout the entire church, and a notable hush fell over the ceremony, unmistakable even from behind the safe confines of the hidden room.

Miss Middleton's eyes rounded, and she scrambled from his embrace to take up position on the footstool once more, effectively dismissing his presence. Not to be excluded, and having learned his lesson from speaking in this hidden room, Brahm moved beside her to the air vent and peeked through.

Sure enough, the entire ceremony had come to a halt, and the duke's face had reddened to that of a ripe tomato. The bride, almost nervously, glanced back, searching for the man who so loudly voiced his outrage. After a breathtaking moment of anticipation, in which no one claimed responsibility, the bride shrugged and continued forward; the orchestra followed her lead and chimed in again. Even the duke visibly relaxed, though his eyes remained alert.

Calm . . . for now, Brahm mused.

How did the duke not know the difference between the two women? Even Brahm could tell the dissimilarity between them. For one, Willow Middleton was much milder and level-headed than her wild sister, a trait that could be easily spotted in the way she held herself, even in the way she walked. Holly Middleton had more of a

spring to her step and did not possess a regal bone in her body. That alone should have tipped off the duke, and if not that, then the obvious difference in height.

The entire ceremony held him captive. He wanted to look away, wanted to scold the Middleton standing next to him, but could do neither. He knew what was coming, what was transpiring before him, but damn if he could tear his eyes away.

And who was he to protest? The last thing he wanted was to become embroiled in the lives of these three chits, notorious for their lack of grace and wild, reckless behavior.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God . . ."

"Lord Almighty," Brahm heard Miss Middleton whisper as the ceremony commenced.

". . . have and to hold from this day forward . . ."

"This cannot be happening," she whispered again.

". . . if any of you knows any impediment, why you may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony . . ."

Miss Middleton let out a low croak as they both waited for someone, anyone to voice an objection, but only soft murmurs of assent filled the room.

Brahm held his breath, as did Miss Middleton, he imagined, both of them engrossed in the entire affair.

". . . have this woman to be thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor her, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?"

"I will," spoke the voice of the duke, firm and resolute.

Brahm's gaze swung to the bride.

"Wilt thou have this man to be thy wedded husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou obey him and serve him, love, honor, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?"

"I will."

A soft gasp came from Holly at Brahm's side.

God help him, but he had stumbled upon a scandal in the making. In retrospect, it was amazing how they got away with it. But then, who would ever suspect a bride swap?

Finally, after a drawn out ceremony, it came down to the moment when the duke lifted the veil of his bride. If the man felt any shock at finding an entirely different sister behind the lace than the one he'd been betrothed to, it didn't show on his face.

Troublemakers, the lot of them.

Good luck to you, St. Ives. You will need it.

A soft whimper reminded him that he too was stuck with one of those troublemakers. What the devil had possessed him to follow her? If they were caught together, his head will be slipped in the noose as well.

Brahm raked her with a scowl. "You are in serious trouble, Miss Middleton."

"She wasn't supposed to take my place," Miss Middleton said, her voice filled with misery. She turned to him. "Willow was only meant to leave a note."

"Be glad that she did. The duke's fury might have been the ruin of your entire family. Advice for the future, Miss Middleton: when you do not wish to marry someone, decline their offer."

"Perhaps the marriage had been arranged by my father."

Brahm snorted. "You are not the oldest, are you? Besides, if your father had wished for you to marry, he'd have gotten rid of the lot of you years ago."

Her outraged gasp caused the people nearest to the wall to look around.

"Would you settle your feathers?" he scolded, his eyes burning into hers. "Given your state of undress, lest you still want to be married, keep your voice down."

Those temptingly full lips snapped shut.

Good.

The last thing he wanted was to be fastened to her for the rest of his life.

Pivoting on his heel, he turned to leave. But years of courtesy drilled into his skull caused him to hesitate. Confound it! Now was not the time for chivalry. But he looked back at her. Damn if she didn't resemble an abandoned alley cat. Her small shoulders drooped in defeat. She was a little thing, and with his size, he dwarfed her. But it was her blue eyes, so full and trusting in her delicate face—though there probably wasn't an innocent bone in her body—that got to him.

"Can I escort you somewhere?" Brahm offered.

She perked up. "You would assist me?"

"Against my better judgment," he muttered, noting how with each breath she inhaled her corset pushed up the delights that lay beneath. While not large, her breasts were just the right amount to tempt a man to settle his lips there. Of course, that obliterated the childlike image of her that he had carefully constructed in his mind.

"Blast it," he swore, shrugging out of his coat and offering it to her. "Just cover yourself up, for Christ's sake."

"You curse a lot."

"Only when I'm vexed," Brahm snapped.

"Which is a lot."

Brahm narrowed his eyes on her. "And you talk a lot for a lady in need of assistance."

She snatched the jacket from his fingers and turned her back on him in a haughty whirl. "Fine."

For the tenth time that day Brahm wondered what madness had possessed him to involve himself. And since when did he find Holly Middleton attractive? It was as though in the span of a moment she had transformed into an exotic fruit, and he could not help wanting to take a bite of her sweet nectar.

God save him.

Sweet nectar?

His head felt as though it had been split in two, yet he hadn't taken a blow to it. Not even a quarter of an hour in her presence and she'd driven him to complete, utter madness.

The chit wasn't even his type. Not that he claimed to have a type, but he did prefer his women tall and busty, not frail little creatures such as she. And he favored women who, to be frank, resembled a woman and not a child. In fact, he had always seen the sisters as just that: children, nursing at the teat of a wet nurse, suckling on velvety cream breasts—

Christ.

He turned away and busied himself by glaring at a pile of stacked books, finding it more prudent than watching her shrug into his jacket. When she finished, she came to stand before him, a small smile curving at the edges of her lips. Of course, his gaze just had to drop to those soft mounds to see if they were well and truly concealed.

"What are you staring at?"

Brahm's head snapped up. "I . . . er . . . just asserting that your interesting choice of apparel is covered."

"Oh! They are marvelous, are they not? My cousin Belle had them designed for me."

Well, that explained everything, then.

The muffled pitter-patter of footsteps moving alongside their hiding place drew their attention back to the matter at hand.

"I must speak with Willow," Miss Middleton implored in a solemn voice. "Will you help me?"

Brahm shook his head. "Not possible, I'm afraid. You must leave town at once if you wish to avoid the backlash that's to follow this scandal, and if you are wise, Miss Middleton, you will stay away for a lengthy time. Or at least until the duke has forgiven this deception."

"I'm well aware of the consequences, sir. But I must know if my sister is all right."

"And if you are caught?"

"I'm ruined, not a fugitive of the crown," she snapped.

"Besides the fact that St. Ives won't leave your sister's side, it will be best to first determine whether he will be out for blood," Brahm said, resisting the urge to glare her down.

Her hands had lifted to rest on her hips, and her blue eyes narrowed on him in a way that strangely stirred up a desire to kiss her.

He almost groaned.

"You are right, of course. But where will I go? I do not wish to burden my family, not until I know what the duke plans to do."

"Have you no one you can visit in the country?"

She shook her head. "I'm a social outcast now, remember."

His jaw slackened. "There is absolutely no one? What of friends?"

"Of course I have friends. But none I'd ever put in the position to lie for me! This is such a dreadful mess."

Brahm concurred. "I own a cottage in Dover," he found himself saying. "It's not much, but it remains vacant, so you will be shielded there until the dust settles."

Hopeful eyes shot to him, and for one mad moment, he desired to do more than just provide her a safe place to stay. He wanted to offer her something intimate, like brushing his lips against hers. Then he instantly dismissed the notion. He was not her damn hero, and kisses would not be considered. Granted, by dispatching her to one of his estates, he might just have reached the height of insanity. It also meant she'd fall under his protection.

God help them both.

"I will be most grateful for your assistance."

"It's nothing," he muttered gruffly. It was deuced hard not to react to the relief in her voice when his protective instincts were already so fired up. He clenched his hands at his side. "I will secure a ticket with a mailing coach. It should be sufficient."

"You will not escort me?"

It was on his lips to say no. The reply had already formulated in his brain, but, then, "Do you wish for me to escort you?"

"Only if it's not too much trouble."

Brahm scowled, more to himself than at her. Damn those big, blue eyes staring up at him! It was simple. Just say no. *No*. But while his mind remained clear on the matter, his mouth apparently did not.

Before he could react, Miss Middleton threw herself into his arms, and he grunted as his breath left his body. The chit packed some mighty strength into her petite frame.

"Thank you! You shall not regret this."

He pulled her off him, holding her at bay by the shoulders. "No need for that, Miss Middleton. Any gentleman worth his salt would aid

a lady in need of his assistance.”

She cocked her head to the side. “I daresay not any gentleman would be brave enough to risk the wrath of a duke.”

“Then I am unique,” he muttered. Because here he was, dead in the center, about to do something altogether out of character: aid a Middleton in a mad scheme. For once, his sister would be pleased. And *that*—Josephine’s fondness for the Middletons—was the only reason he was assisting Holly Middleton in the first place.

Or so he told himself.

Chapter 4

On the lips of every guest, speculation stirred about what would, in the coming days, be called ‘the wedding scandal of the century.’ A select few believed that Willow was indeed Holly and that the resemblance between them was simply uncanny. Others pointed out that one sibling had noticeably been missing at the ceremony and believed something wicked was afoot. But the majority correctly assumed that the country “heathens” had pulled the wool over the duke’s eyes and swapped places.

Then, assuming the latter was true—it was the most scandalous and therefore the most gossip-worthy—the crowd began to wonder *why* the sisters would trade places, as if ensnaring such a grand-titled gentleman for a husband were at the top of every lady’s list. Which, of course, it normally was.

Holly listened to these wild rumors, ears pressed up against the wall, as they waited until they were confident that most of the guests had departed and that the duke had ushered his new bride from the church. St. Ives, at least, gave no indication that he had just married the wrong sister.

The more romantic of the guests surmised that Holly had fallen in love with another man and had eloped with him. Others theorized that she was barren and could not supply the duke with an heir—though how on earth they thought she would know such a thing was beyond her. Some of the older matrons even assumed her limbs must be disfigured, for why else would she desert the wedding?

Preposterous!

Holly even heard a person claim the fault lay with her father for refusing to remarry. “. . . heathenish behavior . . . a result of being raised by a man . . .” the woman was saying.

Heathenish?

Honestly.

But perhaps that person had been closer to the truth than anyone else. For their father had raised them to chase after their dreams, to be happy, and not to settle for anything less than what he had shared with their mother: love. So why had Willow gone and done such a lamentable thing as marrying St. Ives?

Holly let out a small sigh and concentrated again on the gossip. So far no one had remarked on the absence of the Marquis of Warton.

Her eyes flicked to him. He stood stiff as a tree stump and said not a word. And he held that starched position until the voices receded, leaving only silence in their wake.

Holly found herself intrigued by the taut expanse of his waistcoat. And though she really ought not to, she felt secretly thrilled that someone had come to her aid—even if that someone was the temperamental Marquis of Warton.

“It’s time,” he said and swiftly guided her from their hiding place and out of the church. Unfortunately, once outside, their luck ran out. Many of the guests were still waiting for their carriages and were using the time as an opportunity to continue to gossip about the scandal.

“Walk beside me.”

Holly nodded, drawing the oversize coat tight around her and securing Willow’s shawl around her head. Warton was a big man, frighteningly so, and his body provided the necessary shelter for her to sneak past the bystanders unnoticed. All things considered, dashing through town in nothing but her undergarments would not have counted in her favor.

She was still ruined, of course—irrecoverably so.

And all Holly could think about was how unfortunate that her ruination hadn’t been the result of a torrid affair. At least then she’d have known some kind of passionate encounter.

Then again, one could probably argue that love was a form of passion and that *love* had been what had ruined her. Or rather, the falling out of love had been. And for that, she placed the blame firmly on St. Ives’s arrogant head. He had been the root of the cause. Him and all of his rules. Nevertheless, had she not fancied herself in love with the devil in the first place, all of this might have been avoided.

In a way, they were both to blame.

Willow might have a point; maybe love ought not to be a prerequisite for marriage. Even Poppy believed that falling in love was not the same as loving a person, but Holly had always been of a different opinion. Love, to her, was love—regardless of the speed, duration, or form.

Perhaps that was the problem.

Perhaps they were both right.

Either way, it had been deeply irresponsible to agree to marriage on a whim. Now the duke would demand . . . well, Holly did not know what he would do, but he'd require *something* for this betrayal. That much was certain.

"I cannot believe how foolish I've been," Holly muttered.

Warton snorted.

"Oh, all right," Holly grumbled. "I can believe it."

They turned a corner and Warton's carriage came into view. For the first time that day, Holly allowed herself a breath of relief. With a bit of luck, they would depart without incident.

As soon as they reached the curve of the street, Warton's strong hands gripped her waist, shoved her inside the carriage, and climbed in behind her.

"Was that really necessary," she grumbled, settling into the seat.

Warton grunted. He leaned over to close the door, when a pair of pail fingers yanked it open again.

Poppy's head poked inside. She arched a brow at the two of them. "Well, this is a sight I never thought I'd see."

"Poppy!" Holly exclaimed. Guilt and shame churned in her belly but still she could not conceal the delighted flutter in her heart at the presence of her sister. She had never been so happy to see Poppy in her life. "What are you doing here?"

"What am *I* doing here? What are you doing here? Everyone is looking for you, but I wanted to find you before anyone else. What happened? Willow has been whisked away by the duke, and Papa is out of sorts. And not to say anything about the dowager—I heard she fainted right on the sidewalk!"

Holly blinked.

Had the Dragon Duchess fainted? *Of course she had!* It would be just like that woman to pull out every dramatic stop.

"What else happened?" Holly asked her sister.

Poppy bit her lip. "I heard the Countess of Rockworth say she overheard Lady Mastley tell Sir James that St. Ives will demand retribution for today's deception."

"But that's just gossip."

"Apparently Lady Mastley claimed to have heard the rumor directly from the source—St. Ives—after he roused his mother back from her faint."

Oh, no.

She'd known the duke would want something but had not thought it'd go quite so far as *retribution*.

Already Holly's imagination ran wild with possibilities and images

of being flogged or paraded down the street while everyone snubbed her. She might even be ordered to work as a maid in the duke's kitchen! Or what if he demanded she be sent away? Perhaps even to a country as far as Russia?

"Miss Middleton." Warton's sharp voice interrupted them.

When both their heads whipped his way, he raked a hand through his hair and sighed. "Please get inside before we are discovered."

"Oh, of course," Poppy said and jumped into the carriage, shutting the door firmly behind her. "How did the two of you end up together, in any case?"

"Oh, he followed me," Holly said, motioning to Warton, who narrowed his eyes at her.

"After I saw you acting suspiciously."

Poppy's gaze flicked from one to the other. "That explains that but what of Willow? Why did she marry the duke?"

"That is what I would very much like to ask her. She was supposed to pin a note saying I had run away."

"But she took your place, instead."

Holly nodded.

"My question, then," Poppy murmured, regarding them with avid interest, "is what the two of you are up to?"

"Who says we are up to anything, Miss Middleton?"

Poppy arched a brow as if to say, do you really expect me to believe that?

"I think it best to lie low," Holly said. "At least until the dust settles. My presence in London will only remind the duke of what transpired here today, and I do not wish to make things worse for Willow."

"That does make sense," Poppy murmured.

"And the Marquis of Warton has agreed to escort me to one of his cottages in the country."

At that, Poppy's jaw dropped. Her eyes flicked to Warton. "He did?"

"Do not look so shocked, Miss Middleton. I am a gentleman, after all."

"Ah, yes, the famed gentlemanly honor to assist ladies and whatnot." Then to Holly she whispered, "I do not have to remind you that his," she motioned to Warton with her head, "actions aren't born of love?"

Warton's gaze sharpened.

"Poppy!"

Holly's face flamed. Of course, she knew that! She had just fancied herself loved by the man she left at the altar, and she wasn't about to make the same mistake twice.

"I'm just saying. Do you honestly believe this wise?"

Warton stiffened, his features clouding as his gaze narrowed at

Poppy, who leaned forward, her voice dropping an octave. "You've already incurred the wrath of a duke, and running off with another gentleman may only fuel that anger."

"The duke will not know because you will not tell him. In fact, you mustn't tell anyone, except, maybe, Willow. I will send a note to father reassuring him I'm safe and well, visiting a friend."

Poppy rearranged her skirts. "If that is what you wish to do, I will not stop you. By this time tomorrow word will have spread throughout the city and beyond. By next week the 'heathen wedding swap,' as people have labeled it, will be on the lips of every gossipmonger in England."

The heathen wedding swap?

What a dreadful analogy!

"I am so sorry, Poppy," Holly whispered. "This might ruin your chances at a good match."

Poppy harrumphed. "The man I marry will not pay attention nor care for such minor things. You, on the other hand, must guard against further damaging your reputation." Her sister spared Warton a purposeful glance. "Perhaps I should come along to act as your chaperone?"

Warton shook his head. "It will draw too much attention and unnecessary gossip if two sisters disappear."

"Fine," Poppy muttered. "But at least apprise me of your destination?"

"It is best if you are not party to all the details," Warton said, massaging the bridge of his nose. "But if you must send word to your sister, you can arrange a message with my man of affairs. He will know how to get in touch."

Poppy nodded. "Right. Thank you."

Warton's jaw tightened but he nodded. "If I were smart, I would hand you both over to your father and wash my hands of this mess."

"So why *are* you helping me?" Holly challenged, her chin raising a notch, even though she held her breath.

His dark eyes bore into hers, which had an immediate effect, as all the hairs on her arms rose.

"I have always gotten the sense you do not care much for our family," Poppy said, interrupting the moment.

If that had been a moment at all. Holly hoped not. There could be no moments between them. Of any kind.

Warton raised a black brow. "Well, at least we now know your senses can be on point." There was a pause, and then his big shoulders shrugged. "At times."

"That still doesn't answer my question," Holly pressed.

"When I know the answer to that, Miss Middleton, you will be the

first I inform. Rest assured, I will assist you—but only to our agreed-upon destination. Make no mistake. From there you will be on your own.”

“I ask for nothing more,” Holly said.

Poppy’s eyes flickered between them, a frown creasing her forehead. “Well, then, since you have everything in hand, I best get back. Will you stay in town for one more night? Willow may want to see you before you leave.”

“I rather doubt the duke will allow her,” Holly said miserably.

“Perhaps,” Poppy agreed. “But the duke has never come up against a Middleton before. Our sister might be able to slip out tonight. If not, she will at least pen a letter.”

Holly turned to Warton, who cursed under his breath. “Very well, you can stay in Josephine’s chamber, but we depart before the break of dawn.”

“Thank you,” the sisters murmured together.

“Do not thank me. You are not out of the woods yet.”

Holly nodded, leaning forward to pull her sister in for a tight hug. “Please tell Willow that I am sorry.”

Poppy nodded. “Good luck.”

Warton waited until she slipped from the carriage before wrapping on the roof.

Holly lowered her gaze and laced her fingers together, not wanting him to witness her inner battle to keep the tears at bay. Emotion clogged her throat. Now that she had spoken with Poppy and the tension of the morning had worn off, all she wanted to do was throw herself onto a bed and cry until there were no more tears left to shed.

Guilt overwhelmed her. How would she face Willow this evening? What would she say? She ought to have been stronger. Now Willow might be miserable for the rest of her life, all because of Holly’s enthusiasm to find a fairy-tale love.

“All will be well, Miss Middleton, given enough time.”

Holly lifted her eyes to find Warton staring at her. She rubbed her arms. Just how long was enough time? A few days? Weeks? Months? *Years?*

“I am concerned for my sister. The duke is . . .” Words failed her.

“St. Ives will come to his senses. And if your sister is anything like you, then I would not lose hope yet.”

Holly offered him a small smile. Those were the kindest words anyone had ever said to her. “You know, it occurs to me that this is the first time we’ve ever had a civil conversation.”

“No, Miss Middleton, it’s the first time we’ve *ever* had a conversation.”

Holly’s lips stretched into a wide grin. “I do believe you are right.”

He was also right about Willow. If there were anyone who could outsmart a duke and manage his ridiculous rules, it was her sister. Willow would not have married St. Ives if she hadn't been confident she could handle him.

"I am always right."

Holly refrained from rolling her eyes at Warton's male arrogance. She also did not know why she was reacting to him, but she suspected it might be because he was playing the part of the chivalrous knight. Which was not good. Not for her. Because knights that save damsels usually end up kissing them. Which would be another bad thing. Because if Warton ever kissed her, then she might get all sorts of ideas—like how would it feel if he caressed her collarbone with his fingertip? What would it be like if he whispered sweet words into her ear? How would his bare chest feel under the palm of her hand? Or, God forbid—what if *he* was the one?

Poppy was right. Traveling with the marquis was not a good idea. But she was going to do it anyway.

Whether Holly liked it or not, today marked the beginning of a storm rolling her way. And whether she wanted to or not, she must steel herself for the repercussions. But she did know one thing: no matter what the aftermath or how much she feared it, she would never regret not marrying the Duke of St. Ives.

Chapter 5

“Miss Middleton.”

Holly jerked at the sound of her name and glanced up to Warton, who had appeared in the doorway. She was sitting curled up in his parlor, enjoying the warm glow of a fire crackling in the hearth, lost in thought. A sense of awareness stole over her.

He was leaning with his hip against the threshold, studying her with hooded green eyes. His dark hair, windswept and overlong, reminded her of a barbarian more than a proper lord. Like most gentlemen, he preferred to keep his face cleanly shaved. Unlike for most men, it did nothing to soften his features.

It was impossible to look away.

“You are worried about your sister.”

Oh, Lord, and that voice. Butterflies fluttered up against her spine every time his deep, throaty baritone blended with concern.

She nodded. “I’m wondering whether Willow will be able to slip away tonight.”

“I have a coach waiting for her should she succeed.”

“Thank you.”

He pushed away from the door. “Why did you not marry St. Ives?” he asked, settling into the empty chair across from her. “You would have been a duchess.”

But she would not have been loved. Neither would she have loved her husband. For her, that was the most important thing. Unfortunately, it seemed also the most impossible thing.

“I made a mistake,” she admitted.

He spread his long legs. “There are worst mistakes than wedding a duke.”

“Spoken like a true nobleman.”

"Indeed." He lifted a brow. "Yesterday I would have claimed there is no motivation good enough to cause one to desert a betrothal agreement."

"And today?"

"Today I am curious."

She gave a tired smile. "I believed he loved me. I believed a lot of things."

"What changed?"

"He revealed his true character, and well, I fell out of love with him."

His head tipped to the side. "I may not be practiced in all this nonsense of romance but how does one fall in love with a person without any awareness of their true character?"

When he put it that way . . .

"With a dramatic sense of flair, my lord, and an impractical amount of foolishness."

She thought his lips quirked and tried not to think how dangerously attractive she found Warton. Or how enticing was the scent of soap clinging to his skin. In all of her past dealings with him, she had never taken notice of him in such a way. And considering she had imagined an entire romance that hadn't existed, this was perilous territory indeed.

Get hold of yourself, Holly. You just jilted a duke.

It still stung that Holly had been so impressionable and over-eager to grasp onto the cock- and- bull fiction St. Ives had presented to her.

"St. Ives must have been desperate for a wife," Warton said.

"I never thought to ask."

"Considerate of you—or more foolishness. What did St. Ives reveal that caused you to run away?"

She shrugged. "He handed me a set of rules to be followed once we were married."

Something blazed in his eyes. She felt his scrutinizing stare all over her. Gooseflesh fanned out over her skin. And try as she might, she could not break his gaze.

And Holly did try.

"What manner of rules?" he asked, leaning forward and resting his arms on his knees.

"Restricted eating plans, prescribed sleeping hours, and such rot."

"That is bloody ridiculous."

"Agreed. I stopped reading when I came to the clause that stated breakfast includes *one* slice of toast."

"You enjoy toast?" Amusement colored his eyes.

"I *love* toast."

"I never imagined St. Ives as a controlling—"

"Tyrant?"

"Dictator."

"He is certainly that. There was even a mark on wifely duties."

"Wifely duties?"

Her cheeks warmed. "You know . . . marital relations."

"I see." He pressed his lips together to keep from laughing.

Holly wasn't certain she saw the humor, but she was not going to express any further remarks on the topic of intimacy—the very dangerous, all much too tempting topic.

"Of course, women are not above certain rules," Holly murmured. "I am aware we cannot just do as we please. By all accounts we are at the mercy of our husbands. But a three-page set of rules dictating my life—that is stretching even my limits."

Warton whistled. "Three pages, eh?"

She nodded. "And now Willow must deal with the beast. I still cannot believe she took my place."

"I imagine your sister only wished to do what is best for your family."

"At least she is a duchess. However much comfort she can draw from that."

"And you get a second chance."

A second chance.

"I probably shouldn't set my sights on a duke again," she said with a small smile. "I imagine I burned that bridge to the ground."

Warton leaned back in his chair, chuckling. "I imagine you did."

"Perhaps I shall become a pirate."

He raised a brow. "I doubt the life of a pirate is as romantic as the picture in your head, Miss Middleton."

He was probably right.

"I am still in possession of all my teeth," she agreed. "A life of a famous painter or infamous writer shall suit me better."

"Both noble and brazen pursuits, I think."

Her gaze slid to the burning embers in the hearth. The thought of having another chance, a do-over, so to speak, held a startling amount of intrigue. What would she wish to do, then, now that she would not be the wife of some duke or another lord?

"May I remark upon something, Miss Middleton?"

"Of course," Holly murmured.

"You are not the same woman you were since your last trip to London. Granted, you are still a small bundle of trouble, but there is something different about you."

She lifted her eyes to his.

Oh, lord. She had been in far too much danger of liking him already, and now he had gone and said that. And there *was* something

different about her, in so far as she had just gone through her first love disappointment.

But she doubted that was what he meant.

Did he feel this newfangled awareness between them too? Or was this yet another fancy she had constructed in her mind?

"I suppose, with time, we all endure a fair degree of reform."

The punch Brahm felt to his gut drew the breath from his lungs. He stared into the shimmery blue eyes of Holly Middleton, aware of every pulse pumping through his veins. She looked so young, so innocent, so entirely intoxicating. There was something about her impish grin and the way it brightened her delicate features. Something had changed about her. She was so unlike the girl always making a spectacle of herself. Something had shifted. Grown.

He *noticed* her.

A bloody disconcerting fact.

The thought circled his head until his muscles stretched taut beneath his clothing. Even his relaxed posture could not settle the tension gripping him.

He managed to tear his gaze away from her and glanced broodingly into the fire.

Brahm had never thought there would come a day when he would aid a woman with any scheme—and certainly not Holly Middleton. His actions today were shockingly out of character for him. He should have handed her over to her guardian, as was his first instinct.

So why the hell hadn't he?

Brahm wasn't ready to delve into that question yet.

Furthermore, he was now firmly invested in helping her, for one simple reason—if anyone ever discovered Miss Middleton had been alone with him, in a hidden passage, in his home, in a carriage, there'd be hell to pay. Especially since it wasn't in the spirit of holy matrimony.

"I'm curious, what would you have done if I hadn't found you?"

"I don't quite know." She gave him a self-deprecating grin. "I didn't have time to come up with a master plan."

"Of course," he muttered. "Master plans take days to set in motion."

"Do not mock, they *do* take days to put in place."

"That you even think in such terms terrifies me."

"Because I'm a woman?"

"Because you are a Middleton."

She laughed, and he could not help it. His gaze dropped to her lips. A jolt of fire bolted through his body.

Sweet Christ, this was not happening.

"I suspect, if St. Ives has a mind to search for me, he will cast his net as wide as the country," she said. "But he will not expect that I am traveling with you. I reckon he will comb the landscape for a woman journeying alone."

Brahm blinked a few times.

Oh, yes. They were traveling together. Unchaperoned. For days.

God help him.

"That is, unless someone recognizes us and points the duke in our direction, in which case I suggest you pack your dueling pistols."

Brahm sat up.

"Miss Middleton, I have no intention of firing a pistol. Nor do I plan on us getting caught."

"I am only jesting." She pulled a face. "But, and you may take my word for it, pistols do come in handy in the country."

He just bet it did. Already his mind imagined her wreaking all sorts of havoc with a pistol in hand. Fending off highway robbers, hunting deer—he put nothing past her.

"Why have you not married?" Miss Middleton asked.

He quirked a brow at the question.

"I mean, you *are* a marquis."

"Good of you to notice."

"So you must sire an heir."

"You sound like my sister," he muttered.

He felt her eyes probing him, and prickles of awareness sparked to life on his skin.

"So you are holding out for love, then?"

Brahm snorted. It was a loud, derisive sound. How the hell had the conversation gone from St. Ives to pistols to *this*?

"Then you have not married out of sheer stubbornness?"

For the love of Christ.

She was like a dog with a bone.

"I prefer solitude over the incessant chatter of a woman." There, let her gnaw on that.

"Well, it's curious, then, that not only did you decide to assist me today, but you are also the one who began this conversation."

"A fact I am starting to regret."

"You know, it's this moodiness of yours that prevents you from attracting the right woman. You ought to smile more."

"And what woman would that be?" He *did* smile. He smiled just the right amount of smiles.

"Why, a woman capable of managing your capricious moods."

"I don't need to be managed," he spit out.

She cocked her head to the side. Her blue eyes sparkled as though

she was privy to some mysterious knowledge he had yet to stumble upon.

"If today is anything to go by, it is women who require managing," he said, lifting one dark brow.

"Then let us both hope we find suitable matches one day."

Brahm watched her features light up with momentary wistfulness. By all accounts, he should be grunting and groaning in displeasure at the role of protector he'd been cast into. Instead he was fascinated by the woman sitting across from him—more precisely, her lips.

He shook his head to clear it.

"I do hate waiting," Miss Middleton remarked. "Especially the suspenseful kind. I have never been any good at twiddling my thumbs."

Brahm cast a bemused glance her way. Sure enough, her brows were knitted together, and her lips were pulled into a small pout. He was about to suggest she read a book when a loud knock echoed through the parlor.

Someone was at his door.

Miss Middleton's scrambled up from the sofa.

Their eyes locked. Brahm shook his head, indicating for her to be silent and to remain rooted to her spot. It was unlikely that St. Ives would ever suspect him. But someone might have seen them slip out of the church or noted Holly's sister's departure from his carriage.

A cloaked figure sailed into the room.

"Do you always leave your front entrance unlocked?" the woman said, removing the hood from her head.

"Willow!"

"Only when I'm forced to give my servants the night off," he replied in an abrupt, rude tone. He wanted the lengths he had gone to, including sitting tight for her, to be clear. "Were you followed?"

"Do not be daft; I am a master of sneaking away undetected."

"Of that, I have no doubt."

Brahm turned to Holly, and his heart nearly leaped from his chest. She stood staring at her sister, her face as white as a sheet of snow.

"Holly?"

The soft whisper of her sister's voice was enough to set her in motion. The sisters rushed to each other and embraced as if they'd been separated for years and not merely a few hours.

"I thought I wouldn't see you again," Holly said.

"Nothing could keep me away," Willow said, a sharp edge to her voice. "However, my husband made it slightly more difficult when he stationed two footmen outside my bedchamber. To keep me in or to keep you out, who is to say? It seems he does not believe I would risk scaling down the side of a house to see you."

Brahm inwardly groaned. Swapping places at a wedding, hiding in secret passageways, scaling down the sides of houses?

A guardian's worst nightmare.

His gaze slid to Holly, who drew her sister in for another hug. He had not anticipated attending the wedding today would result in acquiring *two* new charges.

And he also could not have dreamed in a thousand years that one would be the bride. To be truthful, he needed a moment to recover his composure. But not because of any nightmarish misgivings. Instead a peculiar sense of warmth uncoiled inside him.

And Brahm most surely did not welcome it.

Chapter 6

Holly never wanted to let Willow go. Her arms held comfort and assurance, something she suspected they both were in need of. Up until that precise moment, she hadn't realized just how hard the burden of the day's events had borne down on her shoulders.

It was a crushing weight.

What's more, if her sister did not manage to find happiness in her union with St. Ives, Holly knew, without a speck of doubt, that she would carry that guilt with her for the rest of her life. Still, it was her sister's wedding night, and Willow hadn't dissolved into a fit of tears upon entering, which to Holly was a good sign, if any sign at all.

"Forgive me, Willow. If I'd known you would do something so insane in an attempt to correct my imprudence, I would never have left you alone in that room. Was he furious with you?"

"Oh, he was quite beyond that, but nothing I couldn't manage. The Dragon Duchess, as you so suitably named her, on the other hand . . ."

Willow shuddered. "That woman's wailing almost drove me through the walls. Her incessant caterwauling gave me head pains. She needs to take to the waters of Bath."

"I am so sorry," Holly whispered.

"Oh, hush, I would never have allowed you to marry that beast, not after what you told me. Besides, I have my own motivation for wedding the man."

That gave Holly pause. "You *wanted* to marry St. Ives?"

"Of course not. My reasons have nothing to do with the duke himself."

"I am confused," Holly said, sure her brows were knitted together to reflect that. She was missing something crucial. "The reason you married him has nothing to do with him?"

“Yes.”

“The man is a beast,” Holly felt compelled to point out. Again.

“He is something, all right.”

Warton rocked back on his heels. “I believe what your sister is saying, Miss Middleton, is that she wished to marry and took advantage of an available groom.”

Holly’s gaze flew to Willow. “Is that true?”

Willow nodded, giving Holly a sheepish smile. “But please know I never intended on stealing your betrothed before that moment.”

Holly flashed her teeth. “I suppose that is a comforting thought.” Her amusement suddenly faded. “Has St. Ives spoken to father yet?”

Willow nodded.

Holly tugged her sister to the sofa so that they could be more comfortable. She noted that Warton moved to the far corner of the room, giving them some privacy.

“So, does father mean to lock me away in a tower or perhaps, dare I ask a dungeon?”

“I’m afraid not. The duke has requested father’s permission to establish a betrothal agreement for you and his brother, Lord Jonathan Griffin.”

“I must not have heard you correctly, Willow, because it sounded like you said the duke wants me to marry his *brother*?”

Willow’s answer was a solemn look.

Heavens! Poppy had warned her that the duke might seek retaliation, but this? Did the duke not care for his brother’s wishes?

Damn his devil hide!

Holly had to give credit where it’s due. St. Ives was smart. This was the ultimate punishment—forcing her into a marriage of convenience when he knew how much a love match meant to her.

“I cannot marry your brother-in-law, I do not love him!”

“Regardless of anyone’s feelings, St. Ives has men searching every inch of the city. He suspects, or at least I think he does, that you might return to Derbyshire. He has already dispatched men there as well.”

“But why? Lord Jonathan is on tour. He even missed the wedding.”

“He is expected back any day now, I’m afraid.”

“Surely Lord Jonathan will not stand for this?”

“I thought so as well, but what if the duke threatened to cut his brother off . . .”

“He could marry an heiress,” Holly pointed out.

Warton muttered under his breath. Something about female logic.

“It will still require him to marry. So why not marry you and keep his brother happy?”

Willow made a valid point. “Has father agreed to this arrangement?”

“Not as of yet.”

Bless his loving soul. Charles Middleton might be the second son of an earl and somewhat unconventional, but he possessed a backbone made of rock. And when it came to his daughters, no matter what trouble they'd gotten themselves into, he always championed them.

“Well, then, St. Ives must have demanded father agree, and Lord knows father hates to be told what to do.”

“No man does,” Warton muttered from behind them.

Holly let out a small sigh. “Is it not a crime to wed a relation by marriage?” she asked, thinking that if it wasn't it should be.

“Unfortunately not,” Willow said.

“A pity.”

Her sister gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. “I won't let it come to that. But it might be best if you put some distance between you and the city.”

Holly spared a glance at Warton. “The marquis has agreed to escort me to one of his properties in—”

Willow held up her hand, stopping Holly midsentence. “Do not tell me where you are going. I don't want to take the chance of spilling your whereabouts, however unintentional.” She glanced at Warton. “What of your servants? Are they aware of your destination?”

“I assure you, madam,” Warton drawled. “My servants do not gossip.”

Given all the trouble Josephine had gotten into without her brother's knowledge, Holly thought he might be right.

“Servants gossip among each other, if nothing else,” Willow pointed out logically. “And you've given yours the night off in the wake of a huge scandal. They may not realize the significance, but others may draw suspicion from that.”

“Point taken,” he grumbled.

“We shall be careful to remain undetected,” Holly reassured her.

Willow nodded. “Stop only where you are confident no one will recognize you. For the time being, the duke doesn't suspect you have a protector. That gives you an advantage, Holly, so use it wisely. I will do what I can from here, but we must think of an alternative plan in case I fail to convince the duke to let the matter go.”

“No one will catch us off guard,” Warton reassured.

“Thank you,” Willow said. “I owe you a great debt for aiding my sister.”

He grunted. “The duke will not get his hands on her.”

Again Holly felt a shiver of gooseflesh.

Willow turned to her, one brow arched.

Holly shrugged. Warton was the protective sort. But he was all sorts of other things as well. Like attractive. And broody. But endearing.

Also, at the moment, her champion.

"How will you appeal to St. Ives to accept an olive branch?" Holly asked in an attempt to divert her sister's attention.

"I have no clue, but I shall figure something out. The man is as stubborn as an ox, intent on dictating the lives of others. It shall give me great pleasure to bring him down a notch or two."

Holly took her sister's hand in hers, a lump forming in her throat. "He has not hurt you?"

Willow's countenance softened. "No, dear, I do not believe he shall. He seeks only to control me, and I daresay, should he discover me gone, it will give him quite the fit! But that's the most of it."

"You are so terrible, Willow," Holly said with a smile. "Best hope he does not realize you are gone."

Willow shrugged. "It might do him some good to discover his wife is in possession of a fine backbone."

"I cannot express enough how sorry I am," Holly murmured.

"Stop apologizing," Willow demanded, glancing at Warton. "I came to see if you were all right, and I am pleased to find you have chanced upon a champion of sorts, however shocking."

Warton lifted one dark brow.

"Well, it is," Willow reaffirmed. "If I penned down all of the *least* likely gentlemen to aid my sister, you would have been on the top of that list."

"And why is that, Duchess?"

"Oh, you are known to have a brooding temperament and a quick temper. Not to mention you lack the subtle charm that most gentlemen possess."

"I have charm," he muttered.

Holly smothered a smile. "I'm sure Warton regrets the curiosity that led him to stumble upon me," she teased.

As she expected, Warton only grunted in response, but the curve of his lip told her that he found their remarks amusing.

Their eyes met, and Holly ducked her head. Would there ever come a time when this madness passed and his emerald gaze didn't paint her arms with gooseflesh?

Willow's brow puckered. "Please do not accept another proposal before the dust has settled."

Holly's cheeks warmed under her sister's all-too-knowing eyes. "Do not be silly; I have no wish to fall into the same trap again. And I doubt there's a man in England who would ask for my hand after today," she muttered in a hushed tone. "In any case, I'm practically betrothed to Lord Jonathan Griffin, now, am I not?"

Warton shifted in the corner.

She said the last part with more than a hint of sarcasm. But she felt

that it would be one of the most significant consequences of her actions today, and now one of her greatest regrets, that whenever she did finally find her one true love, he'd likely be too mortified by her actions to ever ask for her hand in marriage. Except, maybe, if he was a pirate. Pirates weren't afraid of anything.

"You are not betrothed yet, and with any luck, you won't be. Best not to provoke St. Ives further until this matter with his brother is resolved."

"Do not worry; I shall not fall in love on a whim again."

God willing.

"That is all I ask. In any event, I can see that you are in capable hands. Come," Willow murmured as she rose, pulling Holly into a tight hug. "I must be off."

"So soon?"

Willow gave a reluctant nod. "Take care of my sister," she told Warton. "The next time we meet I hope it will be under better circumstances."

Warton inclined his head.

"Be well," Holly murmured, watching with a heavy heart as Warton steered her sister away.

He reappeared moments later in the doorway, his sharp features softening when his gaze fell on her. "Come, Miss Middleton. We depart in a few hours, so I suggest you get some sleep."

Holly was too tired to serve up any protest as he led her to her chamber. Of all the ways this day could have drawn to a close, this one had been far beyond the reaches of her imagination. And because she could never quite shed the romantic inside of her, she wondered, what if this was no happy accident but destiny? Perhaps this day had been written in the stars all along. And all she could do now was embrace her fate.

Sleep, the elusive suitor that hadn't called on her in three nights, remained at bay that night, too. Rather rude of him, Holly thought bitterly, as she gazed at her reflection in the mirror, almost not recognizing herself.

Her sister's claim that the duke had sent men in every direction in England, indeed, had left a bad feeling spreading throughout her body, causing her muscles to ache from stiffness. Exhaustion tugged at her, but Holly's mind refused to succumb before it found a solution to at least one aspect of her predicament.

How would she remain undetected in the country?

Thus far, her only advantage was that the duke did not know she

would be traveling with a companion. So, if she altered her appearance in some way, she may have an even better chance of going unnoticed.

So, in the wee hours of the morning, Holly headed to the kitchen in search of coffee beans and a pair of scissors. Once she had found the items, it had been easy enough to chop her hair short. She had never been one to follow the styles of society, so it hadn't pained her to do so.

It had taken longer to stain her hair since she first had to brew a generous amount of coffee and then soak the mixture in her hair. It was a time-consuming business, robbing her of three hours' rest. By the time she had finished, her eyes were burning.

"It looks natural," she murmured as she shifted positions, viewing herself from different angles.

It was hard to tell with only a candle to serve as light, but she could still distinguish a much darker tone in place of her blond hair.

Of course, it was frowned upon to stain your hair—or so Sally, a girl from a nearby parish, had once told her. Sally fancied black hair, and upon asking her father if she could color it, he had promptly burst into a fit of rage and shouted that he would disown her, that staining hair was worse than adultery. Coffee beans, on the other hand, weren't permanent—a trick she learned from a novel.

Holly hoped she had done enough for it to look authentic. She remained skeptical that staining hair was worse than adultery, but she did not wish to unleash another whirlwind of trouble because of her hair.

But in this case, caution outweighed propriety.

Holly touched her new mop, shaking her head and watching the locks bounce on her shoulders. She quite liked her new length, though the color felt bizarre on her. It was odd but strangely reviving—a refreshing change to an otherwise dreary day.

She spared herself another quick glance. This new Holly could do anything she wished. Travel unchaperoned. Become a pirate. Be bold, be daring, and perhaps even kiss a gentleman. This new version of herself felt optimistically brave, as though she could accomplish anything.

She'd need to remember that for what was ahead of her.

After dispensing of the snipped hair, she settled beneath the covers and stretched out onto the mattress with a sigh of delight. Her eyes drifted closed. She might still get some rest before Warton came to wake her.

Then a new chapter of her life would begin.

Chapter 7

Holly sat opposite of Warton, her legs crossed tightly together. Having been awakened before dawn, she hadn't gotten much sleep at all, especially as it had taken her a while to fall into slumber. Her sister's visit and her impulsive transformation had been fresh on her mind, as had been worry over their journey. And due to being ushered out of the house half asleep, Holly hadn't been given enough time to take care of her *needs*.

Needs that now moved her to pinch her lips together tightly.

Warton had yet to behold her new look since she kept it hidden beneath a bonnet. It did not escape her that wearing a bonnet defeated the purpose of her alteration. And had she thought about it at some length, she might have concluded that the simple solution would have been just to bring a bonnet.

Oh, well.

Lesson learned—do not make appearance-altering decisions when exhausted.

She cast a nervous glance at Warton, who stared out of the window in deep contemplation. What would he think of her latest fashion? Would he like it? Applaud her for her genius? Reprimand her for her lack of foresight?

He shifted his long legs, and Holly squirmed in her seat. She narrowed her gaze at the marquis, his eyes now shut, who was evidently unaware of her or her predicament. They had stopped only once, and it had been to change from his family-crested carriage to an unmarked coach. How unchivalrous of him not to even consider she might have needs, though at that time she hadn't required any release.

Now, though exhausted from lack of rest, sleep was once again impossible. Indeed, it required all of her concentration just to keep her

legs tightly crossed and to continually think of dessert. No, not dessert —*desert*. A dry, roasting desert.

But the mention of dessert had her mind flashing to wedding cake, which made her ponder weddings and then mull over the fact that she had jilted a man. The man Willow had married. No, best not to think about dessert or anything remotely related to sweets, churches, or gowns.

Desert.

No, that still sounded too much like *dessert*.

And her bladder was on fire.

Think of something else.

But it was not that easy, for it had reached a point where all she could think about was her burning need to pee. And as there was no other way to postpone her need, the best thing to do was think of ways to capture Warton's attention.

The man had thought of everything, had even packed articles of clothing from his sister's closet for her, along with some books. And yet he appeared clueless about other, more basic needs.

Holly cleared her throat.

No response. Not even the twitch of an eye. Had she been too subtle? She shrugged and drove her boot into his lower limb, blinking innocently when his eyes shot open and pinned her in place.

"How far until we reach the next stop?" she asked.

"Another two hours." He shut his eyes again.

Two hours? She'd have disgraced herself long before then. "And your estimation is certain?"

His brows creased, but his eyes did not open again. "Give or take."

So, in other words, it could still be another two and a *half* hours. Or *three* hours. Perhaps even *four*. Maybe it might be a bit less, but somehow, given her recent luck, Holly thought that doubtful.

She slid her gaze down to the book on her lap, her knuckles white from clutching the spine. She liked reading well enough, but only passages of novels, never the complete story. She preferred to absorb just the right amount of narrative and then let her imagination run wild with the rest.

She flipped the book open to the middle. Perhaps reading would take her mind off the burning sensation of holding her bladder.

A woman alone on the streets of London at this hour . . .

That was how far she got. Her gaze remained stubbornly fixed upon that half of the sentence.

"Miss Middleton, would you stop fidgeting? It is working on my nerves."

Her head snapped up.

Warton's eyes were riveted on her feet.

Brows drawing together, she dropped her gaze, and sure enough, her foot was rhythmically tapping on the floor.

Her foot stopped.

Warton closed his eyes again. Hers dropped back to the book.

“Miss Middleton!”

“I cannot help it!” she exclaimed when her foot started tapping on its own again. “It’s a means of distraction.”

“From what?” Turbulent eyes bore into her.

“I, er . . .”

His eyes lowered to her fingers, fidgeting with the pages of the book, and then to her tapping feet before lifting to lock with hers again.

“For Christ’s sake, spit it out.”

As in verbally inform him she needed to pee?

Certainly not.

But then Holly weighed her options. She could either deal with a bit of awkwardness or endure the wretched blazing of her insides—for two more hours.

Urgh.

She drew in a deep breath, then released it. “Nature calls,” she said, biting down on her lower lip. “Or rather it’s not calling anymore but demanding alleviation.”

One dark eyebrow lifted. “Nature is demanding what?”

“You know,” she motioned with her hands to her private parts. “I need to *relieve* myself.”

His gaze followed the motion of her hands, and a flush of red broke out on his skin. “What exactly are you proposing, Miss Middleton?”

Holly almost released a sigh of exasperation. Men could be so dense at times. What did he imagine she was proposing?

“Well, to stop this coach, for one. Then I shall do the rest.”

He stared at her, unblinking.

“It’s quite simple, really. When one consumes an excessive amount of fluids, your body expels those liquids—”

“I get the point,” he ground out, teeth clenched.

She stared at him expectantly.

“Now?”

“Yes, now.” Holly rolled her eyes.

Warton looked ready to object—he always looked ready to object—but with a sigh of resignation, he shifted his large body and reached out to rap on the roof.

It felt as if it took forever for the coach to lurch to a halt, and Holly wasted no time in scrambling from her seat before Warton could even lift a finger.

He followed her out.

"What are you doing?" She turned to stare at him, perplexed.

"I'm standing guard while you . . . while you go about your business."

Holly shot him a slightly amused, somewhat aghast look. He stood before her, a veritable mountain in size, looking down at her with somber eyes. He was serious.

"That is not necessary."

"And what if you are accosted?"

"By what? A hedgehog?"

His gaze held hers, green and unwavering.

"We are in the middle of nowhere," Holly pointed out.

"Nowhere is somewhere, and what if a wild animal attacks you?"

Holly turned and surveyed the surroundings. There was nothing but landscape for miles, with a few trees scattered here and there.

"I am certain I can manage to avoid any rabid ponies and the occasional feral hare."

"That's not funny."

"I beg to differ. My witticism is one of my finest qualities."

"Miss Middleton," he said impatiently. "I am not debating the issue with you. Either do your business and accept I will stand guard against feral hares and rabid ponies, or get back in the carriage."

Holly ground her teeth together and glared up at him. "I have lived in the country my entire life! This is hardly the wilds of Africa."

"It's still dangerous."

"What if you wait here and I don't venture too far," she motioned to the nearest cluster of trees. "I'll be just over there."

His gaze left hers to travel over the area she had pointed out.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "It's still too far. If anything happened, I might not get to you in time."

"It's not *that* far."

"You will not venture into grazing land unescorted," he persisted stubbornly.

Holly could see there was indeed no use in arguing over the matter. Warton had made up his mind. It was stamped all over his obstinate features. Stubborn man.

"Fine." She threw her hands in the air.

Just fine.

Warton arched a brow, presumably at her tone or her lack of manners, but Holly was past caring what he thought. If she did not relieve her bladder soon, she would embarrass herself more than she would by attempting to defeat a headstrong ox in a battle of wills.

Lifting her hem, she shot him a scathing look and set out on a path straight to the cluster of trees—which, she thought darkly, ought to still provide some measure of protection from his view.

Unfortunately, she had never been as aware of a man as she was at that precise moment, with Warton trailing behind her. It was easy enough to imagine the brisk wind whipping through his hair while his breeches tightened over his powerful legs as he strode after her.

Sweet mercy, she was such a lost cause.

Even the hairs on the back of her neck agreed, for they stood at attention while her stomach pulled together in a tight not. And her breath . . . it felt as though a vise had enveloped her lungs and gripped. Tight.

A few feet before the tree, she turned and leveled Warton with a stern look. He halted abruptly and gave a curt nod. This was as far as she would allow him to go.

Brahm closed his eyes and clenched his jaw. What the hell had gotten into him? Would it have killed him to be more delicate? He shook his head and followed Miss Middleton into the field. She was his charge. She had to understand that. The thought of her venturing too far away from him struck a protective chord inside him.

That said, he would be damned if any harm befell her on his watch. At the moment, she would just have to get over any of her fragile sensibilities on that matter. Of course, he'd put himself in this situation, but it was far too late to lament that fact. He'd get her to Dover, as promised, and then return to London.

Miss Middleton suddenly turned and shot him a withering look. One he understood. The soles of his boots drew to a halt on a muddy patch. He gave a curt nod. This was an acceptable distance.

"I will be behind that tree," she said and pointed beyond her.

"Very well, I shall go no further."

When she just remained rooted to the spot, watching him with a cool, reserved countenance, he sighed. "Is something amiss?"

"Will you turn around?"

"Why? You will be behind a tree."

She cast him a beseeching look. "Will you just turn around?"

Those big blue eyes almost undid him.

"Please."

Bloody hell.

Brahm turned around.

It was for prosperity, really. He would rather not travel the length of their journey with a sulky female.

The rustling of skirts jerked his attention back to his current situation. He willed his mind elsewhere, like the larger, more looming quandary of what to do once they reached the cottage. To stay with

her was out of the question, but could he honestly leave her alone to fend for herself?

It seemed an impossible predicament, but his thoughts on a solution were put on hold when she suddenly marched past him, her back ramrod straight.

Brahm sighed.

He was an abrupt man—often to the point of being harsh. That he could not change. But it probably wouldn't kill him to smile more—like she had suggested.

He said nothing as he entered the coach but remained deeply aware of her rigid composure. Should he apologize? Best not, he supposed, if he did not mean it. Women were like bloodhounds when it came to insincerity, and Miss Middleton was already giving him a cold, downright frosty shoulder.

But he had to say something.

If only to smooth away her puckered brows.

"I won the property in a card game," he confessed, hoping to draw out conversation from her and clear the air between them.

"Really?" She gave him an arch look. "I never took you for the gambling sort."

He widened his lips into a grin. With teeth. Toothy smiles were the most charming. Right? Her head cocked to the side, and his smile slipped.

"Are you well?"

Damnit.

"Fine," he muttered. That was what he got for listening to a woman. After a moment, he said, "I am not usually the gambling sort."

"But you provoke easily."

He fought the urge to defend himself. But she was right. "Turns out I am excellent at cards."

If Miss Middleton was taken aback before, she was thoroughly astonished now.

Brahm felt a slither of annoyance at her reaction. He was a man. Not a damn saint. If he wanted to gamble, he gambled. And he was good at it. He did other things as well—like aid a young woman after she jilted her intended, for example.

"You find that hard to believe?"

"What I find hard to imagine is you keeping your face inscrutable throughout an entire card game."

He stared at her, his face as blank as a sheet of paper.

"Point taken," she murmured, bemused.

Again Brahm experienced the same overpowering awareness he had felt when he had first seen her at the wedding. Her eyes, the color of a bright summer sky, flashed with laughter, and at that moment

something about her made him want to smile.

An honest-to-goodness smile.

“Will you teach me how to win at poker?”

Her unexpected question brought a sudden laugh from him. “You would be terrible at it, Miss Middleton.”

“I would not!”

A lazy smile touched his lips. “You wear your heart on your sleeve. You, my dear, give too much away with all the blushing you do.”

“And who’s to say my blushing would not put me at a distinct advantage? I might excel at the game because of it.”

“All the more reason not to teach you, then.”

“Do you think less of me because I jilted a fellow nobleman?”

It was an even more unexpected question than the last.

Their gazes locked, and Brahm glimpsed nothing but profound curiosity. Conversing with Miss Middleton was like playing a guessing game.

But was that not the bloody question? Did he think less of her for her actions towards St. Ives?

No, dammit.

He knew he thought too damn highly of her. The mischief sparkling in her eyes, her rosy blushes, and her graceful elegance—altogether it called to him. She possessed a gentility that he lacked. And though prone to trouble and wild fancies, she was also gracious. It was damn confounding—this connection that drew him to her. It was more profound than anything he had ever felt, and she—well, she appeared oblivious to it.

But all the better. Brahm did not want her to know just how much he enjoyed her company. That could prove disastrous. The chit had a steep path ahead of her with the scandal currently rocking the London gossip sheets.

“I hardly see why it should matter since I am escorting you to safety—which, to some degree, makes me an accomplice.”

“Which makes us friends, of sorts.”

“A favorable opinion can be formed from a distance. Friendship, on the other hand, starts by finding common ground.”

“We have loads in common.”

“Oh?” he asked, curious.

“Your sister, for one,” she murmured offhandedly.

“Since my sister is not my friend, she does not count. Besides, acquaintanceships do not prove common ground.”

“Why ever not?” she insisted and then scrunched her brows in thought. “Common ground . . . well, I’m sure we have both planted a kiss on another’s lips before.”

Brahm swallowed his stunned surprise. Then something wild and

beastly gripped his insides. "Who the hell kissed you?"

She took no offense at his growl and only tapped a finger to her chin as if trying to recall. Brahm, battling to calm his sudden reaction, clamped his jaw shut. He did not like this response, yet he found himself fiercely curious to the answer.

What man would steal a kiss from the youngest Middleton?

"Rupert Wright."

"I cannot say that I know him," Brahm muttered, the bitterness hard to conceal.

She harrumphed. "Of course not. He's a young shoemaker that lives in a small village not far from our estate."

A shoemaker? His gut settled.

"Who was your first kiss?" she asked, smiling smartly up at him.

"Ladies do not ask such things of a man."

"Was your first kiss with a boy, then? I've heard tales that boys practice on each other. Is that why you are ashamed to tell me?"

"Bloody hell," Brahm muttered, aghast that she would imagine such a thing. Then he glimpsed the laughter in her eyes. "No, Miss Middleton, I most certainly did not kiss a boy. If you must know, it was my sister's maid."

"How shockingly tedious! Did Lady Josephine ever discover what you had done?"

"No."

Kissing was not a topic Brahm wished to pursue. Unfortunately, Miss Middleton thought otherwise. In fact, she went on to list all the boys she had kissed in her youth. By the time she reached Tom Hathaway, Brahm had counted at least eleven names.

"Bloody hell, woman," he interrupted her chatting. "Did you kiss the entire village?"

"Of course not! I did not kiss . . ." and then she proceeded to list the names of all the boys she hadn't kissed. The list was quite extensive, much more so than the list she had kissed, which redeemed her somewhat. It did not, however, stop the sudden urge within him to throw a punch at every boy that brushed his lips against hers.

". . . but I did kiss a gypsy boy once."

That caught his attention. "You kissed a gypsy?"

She nodded—a bit too eagerly for his taste—her features bright with delight.

"There was a gypsy camp on our property one year. They gave us no trouble, so father allowed them to remain until they were ready to move on. It was the last kiss I received and the only one," she leaned forward to whisper the last part, an impish glint entering her eyes, causing everything deep inside him to still, "for which he used more than his lips."

Christ.

"I see you possessed no care for your well-being as a young woman." He knew he sounded more peevish than necessary. It bothered him more than he cared to admit.

"On the contrary, I was always heedful to never allow more liberties. And I learned quite early on that no matter how many boys you kiss, it does not yield a prince."

"You kissed all those boys in the hope they would transform into royalty? Magically?"

"Do not be absurd. I kissed them because I wanted to discover my one true love."

Bloody hell.

"That is insanity. A kiss is a kiss. It does not reveal anything except whether it is a good kiss or a bad kiss."

"I do not believe that."

"What you believe, Miss Middleton, is astonishing. Did you ever kiss St. Ives?"

She shook her head. "Perhaps if I had, I would never have agreed to his proposal."

"You would have known he was not your true love, you mean?"

"Quite correct."

Brahm studied her through hooded eyes. The innocence of her belief marveled him. For her, life was quite simple. Kiss the right man and you would discover your prince. Hell, who was he to dissuade her from that belief, however preposterous? It seemed almost a crime to strip her of such innocence.

But how many more men would she kiss in her quest to find love? The unbidden question struck suddenly, turning his mood dark and grim.

"Why did you not kiss St. Ives?" Brahm asked, his voice more savage than he intended.

She shrugged. "We were never unchaperoned."

Their gazes met and held. Her words wreaked havoc in his mind, and Brahm had to remind himself of his role as guardian. Guardians did not fantasize about their charges, especially about kissing them.

He grunted, looking away from her to stare out of the window. Still, thoughts of what it would feel like to feather his lips across Holly Middleton's filled his mind. And, in pondering that, he mused on her wild belief that a kiss could inform a couple about whether they belonged together.

But if he ever did kiss her, would he know?

Chapter 8

They arrived at a lovely roadside inn three hours later. Holly's relief was so great that she sagged against the upholstery. It had been the longest three hours of her life, and that was saying much. Warton had closed his eyes shortly after their fascinating discussion on common ground. But while he had no more interest in the topic, her curiosity had only piqued.

Why hadn't she kissed the duke?

If she had, she might have discovered sooner that his interest in her was nothing but balderdash. It seemed so much could have been avoided with a simple peck on the lips.

Three hours of turning one missed kiss over in her mind. One hundred and eighty minutes of dreaming up every possible outcome if she had brushed her lips against St. Ives's.

She sent Warton a glance from beneath her lashes. His features were a mask of aloofness, his powerful shoulders stiff. What would he do if she leaned over and smoothed away the hard lines of his face? The gesture would be beyond intimate.

Almost like kissing.

Then, for no apparent reason, the temperature in the carriage soared, and Holly swore she could feel little flames dancing across her skin.

She waited for him to exit the carriage before furiously fanning herself with her hand. All of a sudden, her senses were filled with him: his scent, his presence, and the brief brush of his leg against hers when he rose from his seat.

Averting her gaze away from his broad back as he climbed down, she inhaled a deep breath.

Lord, what was wrong with her?

"We will remain here for the night," he muttered, holding out his hand.

"Marvelous!" She would finally escape the tight confines of the carriage and the broodingly handsome beast that was Warton.

Two brows rose at her exclamation.

"What? You cannot expect me to believe that you are not as stiff as I," she replied.

An odd expression crossed his face, and he cleared his throat. "Miss Middleton, trust me, you are nowhere near as . . . uncomfortable as I."

"I suppose I shall have to take your word for it."

"Please do." His gloved fingers clasped hers and he assisted her from the coach. "Keep your head down and follow closely."

The inn was bustling with activity as they entered, which promptly came to a stop when Warton opened his mouth to speak. It was a deep baritone that commanded attention and, more often than not, from what she could recall, made lesser people quake in their boots with its ferocity.

"We would like to book a room," his voice rocketed through the entrance.

Holly shot him a pained look. He had yet to let go of her hand.

All eyes turned to them.

"Must you be so loud?" she murmured.

Several guests shot her pitying looks, and a moment later a tall, lanky innkeeper rushed to greet them.

Brahm's brows knit together. "Is there something wrong with the way I talk?"

"Of course not, but you are drawing attention to us."

"Well, I—"

His retort was interrupted by the innkeeper. "Now then, how may I be of service?"

Holly slipped on a charming smile and stepped forward, uncertain what the behemoth by her side would boom next. "My husband, Mr. Wart—" the grip on her hand tightened, "and I, would like a room for the night?"

Beside her, Warton stiffened.

"Certainly, Mrs. Wart," the innkeeper said, much more cheerfully now that he was not the recipient of Warton's dark looks.

Those turbulent eyes were solely directed at her.

Luckily, Holly considered herself a master at ignoring narrow-eyed looks and dark scowls.

She beamed up at the innkeeper, a sunny grin that he reciprocated. She also noted there was no wedding band on his finger. Indeed, the man was quite passable, with kind brown eyes that matched the color of his hair. Holly estimated him to be in his early thirties.

An innkeeper's wife.

That was a notion she'd never before considered.

Unable to help herself, Holly winked at the man.

Warton stepped forward, partially concealing her body, and produced a deep rumble from his chest, almost like a growl.

Lord, but the man's temper flared easily!

"Is something amiss?" she asked sweetly, blinking innocently up at him.

"No," he ground out.

But clearly it was *something*, or else he would not have responded through gritted teeth. However, Holly decided it'd be best not to aggravate him further. Once they were in the privacy of their room, he would undoubtedly voice his grievances.

And just as she predicted, once they were alone in their chamber, Warton's temper lit up like fireworks. He whirled on her, bestowing upon her his full, icy glare. The room vibrated with tension.

"What the devil were you thinking?"

She flinched at the instant crack of his voice. "Whatever did I do wrong?"

"*Husband and wife*? Mr. and Mrs. *Wart*?"

Holly reeled backward, the label catching her off guard. Or perhaps it was the image that his words produced: *them*, married. She forced herself to push away the thought.

"That is what has your knickers in a twist? To be fair, you did cut me off at Wart."

"You should not have introduced us as husband and wife in the first place," he growled.

"It seemed the most logical solution since the duke's men are looking for an unaccompanied female, not a married one."

He loomed over her. "That is not the point."

Holly planted her hands on her hips. "Then what is?"

"We must now stay in the same room, whereas I planned on procuring us two separate chambers."

"And what if they didn't have an additional room to spare?" Holly challenged—but mostly to cover the fact that she was starting to panic because she hadn't considered that.

"That is something we will never know, Miss Middleton. But we do know that my *wife* just made me the laughing stock of the entire establishment."

"I am sure I don't know what you mean."

He leaned toward her, his eyes narrowed to slits, and Holly resisted the urge to fan her face again.

"Did you not just bat your pretty eyelashes at the innkeeper?"

"Do not be outrageous. I only winked at him."

Warton pushed his fingers through his hair. As per usual, his eyes were stormy as they stared down at her. But they didn't hold the kind of storm that alarmed Holly. No, they held the kind she wanted to get swept up into.

"That is even worse. Especially combined with your voice, which had gone all syrupy!" he accused.

"Can one even refer to a voice as syrupy?" she ventured. "Besides, a friendly smile hardly makes you a laughingstock, and even if it did, it would be Mr. Wart that they would tease."

"Tease? I'll be the object of ridicule."

"Do not be so dramatic," Holly said, lifting one brow. "And what would you have told the innkeeper?"

"That you are my sister."

Sister?

Her hand lifted to clutch her heart. It was too much. Holly burst into laughter.

"What is so funny?" Warton demanded.

On seeing his affronted expression, she fought to control her giggles all over again. After a minute, she took a deep breath and wiped away a tear in the corner of her eye.

"We look nothing alike!" She motioned with her hand between them, drawing attention to their difference in height and coloring.

"For all they know, you are my half sister."

"Forgive me," Holly said, still rather amused. "I did not mean to laugh at your expense. I promise I shall keep my lips firmly shut at our next stop."

"I will have your word."

"And you have it."

He looked so relieved, she smothered another laugh. Then the words were out before she cared to stop them. "Though I ought to remind you that if we sleep in separate chambers, I am more likely to be stolen away by the duke's men without you to aid me."

"St. Ives is a man, not a blasted king; he does not command an army."

King or not, the duke was dangerous.

But so was staying in the same room with Warton. Holly eyed the four-poster bed with a slight frown. Now that she had a good look at the chamber it did seem rather small and confined. Just like the carriage from which she had desired a respite.

She *had* wanted a respite, hadn't she? Then why was she looking for ways to be in another small chamber with Warton at their next stop? Why did her heart swell in protest at being separated by two bedchambers?

In all honesty, Holly did not wish to be separated from him. She

enjoyed his emerald eyes burning into her and delighted in his protective air. Perhaps a little too much.

And that was a problem. A rather large one.

She stole a glance at Warton, then the bed, and then the small, uncomfortable-looking chair—and then again at Warton.

He was a big man. He took up most of the space with his tall frame and broad shoulders. She ought to sleep in the chair. It would not bother her as much as it would him. Or maybe it would bother her more, being in the best position to watch him sleep.

Oh, do get a grip on yourself, Holly!

She removed her cap and tossed it onto the chair. A deep throaty curse bounced off the walls of the room.

Holly whirled to face Warton, whose eyes were fixed on her head.

“What the devil did you do to your hair?” he barked, the echo of his voice vibrating off the windows.

Her brows drew together in a frown. Warton appeared horrified by her new look.

“You do not like my new style?” Her fingers lifted to touch her shorter crop before she flipped her head from side to side, her locks bobbing about her until it settled around her face in a tousled mess.

She frowned when Warton made a stifled sound.

“You stained your hair.”

“It’s not that bad,” Holly muttered.

“When did you get the bloody time to do that?”

“After my sister came to call. It’s just coffee. It will wash out after a week or so.”

“It will not bloody well grow back in that time!” He cast another glance at her head. “What the devil possessed you to chop off your hair?”

“I quite like my hair this length.”

“It’s not even the same length everywhere.”

Holly’s face flooded with color. “It’s still my hair, uneven though it is.”

He looked as though he was tempted to say more, but instead he let out another *humph* and stomped from the room.

Holly stared at the space that only moments ago Warton occupied. Goodness, but the man was in a mood. There was nothing she could do about her hair now—surely he knew that—except wait until someone more talented could cut it properly.

It still did not give the man an excuse to insult her. *He* would not be the one forced to marry Lord Jonathan if they were caught.

She tore her gaze away from the closed door, glanced between the bed and the shabby chair, and sighed. This was going to be a long night indeed.

Brahm tensed as another small moan came from the bed, his heartbeat roaring in his ears. He sat cramped in the wretched old chair, which was barely tolerable and hard as a rock, listening to Miss Middleton's soft sleeping noises. Her scent filled the entire room, intoxicating him, tempting him.

He shifted, bloody uncomfortable, for the thousandth time.

He reminded himself that he was in this chair because he'd refused Miss Middleton's offer to take the bed, even though she'd insisted on it, using her logic about his size versus her own, which had only caused him to think about their sizes fitting together in the bed. Looking at it, they *could* fit together on the bed—

Damnation!

How the hell had he so utterly lost control over his . . . control? And speaking of Hell, its pit of flames might be preferable to this torture. In fact, it was here, sitting in a chair at the bedside of Holly Middleton, where he was sure he was being punished for past sins. Why else would the devil be poking him with a burning itch to do a number of things that he could not do? Fluctuating between the urge to take her over his knee for recklessly claiming them husband and wife and the incomprehensible need to kiss her senseless for doing so—he was being tortured by the Devil himself.

Brahm rubbed a hand over his face.

He felt disorientated—crazed, even. He had been hurled into a world of paradox: the blood in his veins ran cold with an aversion to the Middleton chits' infamously silly and endlessly troublemaking ways, yet simultaneously, his insatiable hunger for the youngest Middleton heated his blood. It was nonsensical.

Could it be because Miss Middleton was not behaving silly anymore? Or because his behavior suspiciously matched her own now? Brahm suspected the latter, since he hardly recognized himself in the role he had impulsively taken on the day before.

He could only hope that once he had deposited her at their destination, everything would return to order.

But what if it didn't?

Denial was futile. With his offer to escort her to safety, to aid in her escape from the wild winds of scandal and possibly the duke as well, Brahm had set into motion events that might eventually alter his very path in life—if that alteration hadn't begun already.

An uneasy feeling settled within him, as if a rock had been hurled down to the pit of his stomach.

With a low groan, he ran his hands through his hair and faced the

truth: he desired Holly Middleton, which meant his life would never be normal again.

Brahm sighed wearily and gazed longingly at the empty space beside her on the bed. There wasn't much of it, as her limbs took up all but a small margin of the mattress, but still, it was there.

A soft bed as opposed to an uncompromising chair. They were already sleeping in the same room, so why not the same bed? But that would be like saying that because at present Miss Middleton was ruined, why not kiss her?

Just one.

But no, Brahm would not compromise them any further by acting on whatever madness had besieged him.

Miss Middleton remained off limits.

He shut his eyes, determined not to stare at the bed all night.

Earlier, he had been appalled at the length she had gone to alter her appearance. Brahm had felt rather insulted. Her crop suggested disbelief in his capabilities to protect her.

It chafed, that knowledge.

However, he could not deny that the sight had knocked the breath from him. The shorter hair suited her.

There was no denying that Miss Middleton did not deserve to be grouped into the same class as the average ladies he knew. She earned a different classification entirely—a better one. Of course, society would never understand her—or her siblings. The Middletons did not possess one subservient bone in their body, just like his sister, Josephine.

A trait he had come to admire.

Even though he could do without women stirring up mischief.

In fact, he suspected that Josephine's fondness for trouble was precisely why he was stuck in this cursed moment at present. His curiosity would never have gotten the better of him had he not recognized the signs of misbehavior in another female. He had detected trouble in the making and dived straight into it. Had it been instinctual from all those years of protecting Josephine from her own antics—at least the ones he'd known about?

Perhaps. Perhaps he had set after Miss Middleton in the spirit of habitual inquiry upon sensing a lady up to no good, one embracing the chaos of misbehaving, much like his sister.

But what happened *after* he had followed Miss Middleton into the secret passage was still up for dispute. Curiosity was not a reason to entrench himself so deeply in her situation. Neither was a habit left over from years as his sister's guardian.

Could something more than mere curiosity have been what prompted him to set after her back at the church?

Don't be a blockhead, Warton. What 'more' could it be?

And yet, every protective instinct had flared to life when those big, innocent blue eyes turned his way. The word *no* simply refused to pass his lips or even form on his tongue. *That* was not a word he normally had trouble saying to mischievous females, whether his sister or her friends.

No, there was something different about Holly Middleton.

And he was going to have a devil of a time getting her out of his mind when this was all over.

That being said, detachment seemed the only logical solution for the remainder of their journey. The force of his focus must be contained to Miss Middleton's welfare and not on the sensual arch of her neck. Or her soft pink lips. Or her eyes. Or anything on Miss Middleton's person.

Fantasies would not keep him one step ahead of this mare's nest. While Brahm did not wish to make a formidable enemy such as St. Ives, neither was he afraid to do so, if it came to that. Not after what Miss Middleton had revealed about the man.

Brahm hated bullies. He despised tyrants.

The bedframe creaked, drawing his attention back to her slight form. She would have made a fine duchess—a bit peculiar—but fine.

She would make an even better marchioness.

The thought caught him so off guard that his heart stopped for a moment.

He exhaled slowly.

She would, yes—just not for him.

The last thing he wanted was a Middleton stirring up pots of trouble in his life. Permanently.

He preferred a proper wife.

What, then, did a proper marchioness look like?

Well, for one thing, a proper marchioness was not prone to tricks and misbehavior. She was refined, demure, and aware of her place. She would most certainly not speak on topics that were unfit for a lady—like listing all the boys she'd kissed. And she would behave like . . . like. . .

Brahm sighed.

A dull creature grazing in the field of propriety?

Would he honestly be happy with such a wife?

Or perhaps the better question was why was he even debating the issue. Josephine had been nagging him these past eighteen months to get married—could it be she had finally snapped his good sense in half?

A small moan came from the bed, followed by a light rustling of sheets. The sound was so erotic, his insides clenched in growing

desire.

Brahm rubbed a palm over his thigh to help ease his growing agitation.

He had to stop thinking of the bed and the sheets softly caressing Miss Middleton's skin. In his current state of arousal, if he so much as moved, he'd reach for her. And then he would wake her up and find out if kissing her would be as incredible as he imagined it would be.

But he would never stop at just one kiss.

Or a hundred.

Or a thousand.

Then they would have to marry.

And then his wife would be a cheeky marchioness.

But his marchioness could not be Holly Middleton. Hell, Holly Middleton didn't even *want* to be his marchioness. She didn't want his kiss, either.

But what if she did?

Do not go there, Warton.

There would be no more thoughts of kissing her or of the bed, or of kissing her on the bed.

No more.

The end.

Final.

Brahm closed his eyes once more, stretched out his legs before him, and folded his arms across his chest. One thought lingered for his list: much like in the case of bed versus chair, his marchioness ought to make him feel *comfortable*, not uncomfortable.

Certainly not as uncomfortable as Holly Middleton made him feel.

Chapter 9

Holly Middleton had failed. Again. And this time she had done so in spectacular fashion. In fact, she would be the first to acknowledge that the road to failure was not a linear path. Quite the opposite. And in almost all occurrences, she had not recognized her failure until she had passed the last bend on that crooked road. This time, however, she had seen the cliff, or at least sensed it, and yet had careened straight off the edge anyhow.

She had wandered down the path she had promised not to take.

She had become hopelessly infatuated with Brahm Tremont, Marquis of Warton.

Her eyes lifted to cast a sidelong glance at Warton. He sat across from her in the breakfast room, sipping on a cup of coffee, engrossed in the latest edition of the *London Times*.

Perhaps it was more apt to say she had fallen fiercely into attachment. Or maybe savagely into devotion? Whatever the description, her feelings had been quite evident in her dreams, which had included sweet, tender kisses from Warton. And he had been naked. Oh, so gloriously naked.

The moment her eyes had fluttered open, her heart had flickered, quivered, and bloomed in anticipation to wake up to the sight of him.

Oh! You are such, such, such a lost cause!

Unfortunately, the only presence of him had been a note informing her to meet him in the dining room.

She brought her cup to her lips and took a sip of tea.

She still hesitated on the matter—which in itself was curious. She had never been hesitant to acknowledge she was in love. Or infatuated. Or something. That only highlighted the main point more: Whatever she had fallen into, it was unlike all the other times.

In the past, she had fallen in love in a variety of ways. Hopelessly? Yes. In a heartbeat? Surely. In a dream? One or two times. Painfully? Once, actually—compliments of an unsteady tree branch. Madly? Well, her current position could attest to that, surely.

But hesitantly . . . even a little fearfully? Never. She had never hesitantly done anything, which was why a small voice of skepticism cast some uncertainty on Holly's sudden revelation. After all, she had experienced butterflies in her stomach before, had reveled in the same excitement and the delightful feeling akin to falling into a surface of fluffy clouds (which had always just been her swan-diving onto the pillows on her bed).

But Holly had told Poppy not to worry. She had assured Willow her heart was in no danger.

She loathed to prove them right and her, well, wrong. And yet, she could no longer deny her revelation. Because just as she had never hesitated to love, it had also never felt quite so terrifying before.

Never had she tasted this breathless anticipation, this feeling of balancing precariously on a very high ledge. Never had she worried over what she'd find on the landing. Or over what, precisely, she was going to do about it.

And Holly fully intended to do something about it.

Her gaze traveled over the part of Warton's face not obscured by the newspaper, which he had all but plastered over his face.

No, falling in love had never quite happened like this before. Her imaginings were remarkably silent. No wedding bells chimed in her brain. No fanciful daydreaming occupied her mind. No eyelashes batted, and she did not fan herself to the point of dizziness. Instead, all she heard was the rapid beat of her own heart and the quick intake of her breath.

She was utterly focused . . . on him.

Wedding fantasies, flirting, and giggling were of little consequence. And considering that she'd been planning her wedding from the moment she could gather a coherent thought, this was uncharted territory indeed.

She found herself not imagining him in a wedding suit but wondering about another question altogether.

How would it feel to be loved by such a gruff man?

She reached for a knife to butter three slices of toast, lost in thought.

Warton chose that moment to shift the paper and fully reveal his face, which was wearing its usual sharp, dark look. By all accounts, she should feel intimidated by his dark stares and brooding glares. Instead she found them rather endearing.

Clearly, she was infatuated.

But now, what to do about it?

Kiss him?

But after their discussion of kisses, Warton must believe her to be an outrageous flirt. A kiss would therefore not reveal anything to him about her affection.

In fact, seduction through the traditional methods was likely out altogether. She possessed no generous charms, so to speak. Her breasts were far too little and her hips without any curves. In Holly's estimation, her willowy form was her least attractive feature. It seemed that no matter how much she ate, she never put on enough weight to round out her figure.

She reached for another slice of toast for good measure.

One time she had attempted to eat only cake for a month, but after eight days Holly could no longer take any more of the sweetness. She had even overheard a maid once tell the cook that Holly's hips lacked the width necessary for childbirth and that a man only took a wife who could bear him children.

But Holly had never taken those words to heart. Her single-minded passion for a fairy tale forbade it. But she'd admit that her looks weren't overtly womanly in the traditional sense. Some even said she was childlike. And a childlike body hardly inspired passion let alone wanton seduction.

She sighed, nibbling at her toast.

So, what could she inspire?

Well, if she had learned anything from her life, she'd learned this: men preferred women with gumption.

And gumption she had in spades.

She peered at Warton, whose head was still bent over his riveting paper. "Any news?" she murmured.

"Nothing of interest," he answered, his eyes lifting to meet hers. "But there is an entire section dedicated to the etiquette on courtship and weddings and the outrageous lack thereof shown by a certain duke."

Ah. So no names were mentioned, then.

"Interesting," Holly murmured, though she hardly found it so. Progress on the duke's hunt for his runaway former fiancée would have been much more arresting.

"Indeed. It seems society stands divided. On the one hand, the female activists are calling the duke a bully for having taken advantage of a gently bred, naïve country girl."

"And on the other hand?"

"Male indignation for the stand the women are taking against the duke, of course."

Holly blinked at Warton.

"Not what you were expecting, Miss Middleton?"

"I'll say," she muttered, and when he arched a thick, dark brow, she continued with a sigh, "The fact that it is not about me or the duke anymore does have me a tad surprised. And for that fact, I never imagined people would support me."

"Well, there are some who refuse to take a side. But it's also not people, Miss Middleton, but your family. And they are defending you against speculation. Apparently, according to a statement St. Ives sent to the *Times*, he always meant to marry Miss Willow Middleton, and he apologizes for any confusion on the matter. Your cousin, who the papers are calling the Earl of Charming, supports the duke's claim."

Which, of course, was in her favor.

"They nicknamed Bradford the Earl of Charming?" Bradford was anything but, at least from what Holly could recall. They weren't close—not anymore. Perhaps they never were. There had been a time when she believed Bradford enjoyed spending time with her, Poppy, and Willow. But then he'd disappeared from their lives, apparently to travel the globe. Nine years or thereabouts had gone by without as much as a letter. Charming, indeed.

Warton shuddered but nodded. "An unfortunate epithet. In any case, your cousin has sweet-talked all the key lords and ladies of the ton, the papers, and possibly everyone in between into believing you had fallen ill on the day of the wedding and are mending your health at Fairtree Manor in Derbyshire."

"What a load of rubbish."

"Your cousin has also rallied allies in—Westfield, Craven, Grey, and St. Aldwyn—who have all been named as well."

Shocked, Holly snatched the paper from his fingers, her eyes flickering over the content. "The *London Times* wrote that?"

He snatched the paper back. "They only mentioned the connections in passing, as if a reminder of your friends in high places."

Poppy.

Her sister must be behind this, rallying the troops in her stead.

"You may come out of this sterling yet, Miss Middleton."

Their eyes locked and held.

Again Holly forgot to breathe. And for the first time, she found she did not wish for the dust to settle on her scandal. Not this soon. Not yet. Not until she uncovered what this magnetic pull between her and Warton meant—and what it meant to him.

"I suppose I shall never be a pirate, then," she murmured with a pout.

A grin cracked his face. "A pirate, Miss Middleton? That was your solution in the face of complete ruination?"

"That or become a horse breeder. I am so fond of animals, you

know.” Holly blinked dreamily at him in a demonstration of just how fond.

Warton chuckled, and the sound rocked through her, causing a shiver. “You are a strange female, Miss Middleton.”

“Please, call me Holly. I daresay we were past social necessities two villages ago.”

“Very well, Miss Middleton,” and after a moment, “Holly.”

Brahm.

Brahm and Holly.

Together their names shared a delightful ring.

Holly licked her lips, suddenly a little nervous. She saw Warton’s eyes flicker with heat for a moment before he shuttered his expression and whipped up the paper to his face again.

Interesting.

It seemed there was potential to drive the marquis a little mad after all. Perhaps she could spark his passion in small ways, ways he’d never guess were intentional. And then he’d have to kiss her, and he’d learn the truth.

Her grin broadened.

The Marquis of Warton was the one.

He just didn’t know it yet.

The bloody woman was touching him again, driving him to madness with her continual contact. Damn if she didn’t set his blood on fire, stirring his purposefully suppressed desire to life.

Just an hour ago she had leaned over him to peer through his side of the window, bringing her person right up to his face. And her gown, one of Josephine’s, possessed a wickedly low-plunging neckline, giving him ample view of her pearly white skin.

With that, his well-intentioned detachment was shot to hell.

The crux of it was that Brahm had not the faintest notion whether it—the touching—was deliberate or not. Her hypnotic blue eyes hadn’t glinted in a sly manner, nor had her smile been expectant or wicked. Which altogether left him to conclude that she must possess no clue as to what she was doing to him. And if that was the case, it made every touch all the worse, because there was no way, then, to stop them.

And he already ached from the contact.

Every spot her fingers connected tingled with feeling. And every time his flesh prickled, his lips pulled up into a snarl. Not even deliberately but of their own accord. His reaction, however unintentional, was meant to warn her away, to keep her at a safe distance. But did the chit listen? Oh, no. Apparently she did not notice

at all.

Inwardly, Brahm groaned in yearning; outwardly, he stiffened when the carriage presumably hit a stone and she flew forward—right into his lap.

“Oh!”

One of her hands flattened on his chest while the other gripped his thigh, even as her eyes jumped to his in apology. She attempted to scramble away from him, but the movement seemed sluggish, almost reluctant. And had her hand just rubbed up and down his leg?

“For Christ’s sake, Miss Middleton,” he snapped, snatching her by the shoulders and depositing her back on her seat. It was too dangerous to say her name with her pushed up so intimately against him.

“My apologies,” she murmured.

Her voice was so soft that he barely heard her. With some satisfaction he noted her cheeks were flushed, though she did not meet his eyes.

“No harm, no foul,” he muttered and settled back, his breathing not quite steady yet.

She clasped and unclasped her hands in a fidgety manner, and Brahm sighed. He felt like an ass. He hadn’t meant to be so abrupt, but devil take it, the sensations she provoked alarmed him.

How long until their next stop? An hour, perhaps?

Tonight he would procure two rooms, and they would act as damn siblings. He held onto that thought like a man whose very life depended on that promise.

“So that there is no confusion on the matter, Holly, we are to be brother and sister at the next inn.”

“We still look nothing alike,” she said.

He scoffed. Of that, he cared not one bit. For all anyone knew, she resembled her mother and he their father, a plausible explanation should the need to explain arise.

Just a few more miles to go.

“May I rest my legs on your seat? I’m afraid they have gone quite numb.”

Dangerous as hell.

That was how he would now describe Holly Middleton, this entire scene, and this whole journey.

It was rare, at least since his sister married, that Brahm experienced the sensation of pure helplessness. But here he was, powerless, unable to force a refusal past his lips. Instead he merely watched as she lifted her legs and rested her feet beside him.

The action bunched up her skirts to reveal a pair of purple satin slippers, much too posh for the country. However, the slippers were

but a passing notice once his eyes fell on the pale creamy flesh of her ankles.

Brahm swallowed and did the only thing that was in his power to do. He glanced away.

Why the hell were ankles so seductive? That tiny glimpse of flesh awakened all sorts of desires. Like removing her slippers and kissing his way up to her calf and even further than that . . .

He cast another sidelong glance at her creamy flesh, and this time he could not hide it—he groaned.

The tortured sound drew her attention to him. “Are you all right?”

Her question was innocent enough, as expected from any virtuous young miss who would not suspect how wicked his thoughts were running. He felt like a wolf in a sheep den, only the little lamb did not suspect him of being anything worse than perhaps a muzzled dog.

The image reminded him of how eagerly Holly had accepted his assistance and how even her sisters had been relieved at his aid. Did none of them possess even the slightest concern that he may very well be a lecherous hound?

Brahm was on the cusp of exploding with anger and frustration. Did she honestly possess no clue of her effect on him?

“None of you have any damn sense,” he muttered darkly.

Her head whipped his way. “Excuse me?”

“You and your sisters have no sense. Did it never occur to you that I might be depraved and black-hearted?”

“Why ever would you say such a thing?”

Brahm cast a scowl her way. “You believe me righteous, completely uncorrupted?”

“I consider you a man of honor, Brahm.”

His heart caught on those words.

“Why do you ask, in any case? Are you depraved and black-hearted?”

“No, but you have shown no sense, simply accepting my aid when I offered it. Your sisters held no protestations either. I could easily have been a ravisher of virgins, yet you all just assumed I was irreproachable.”

“You do make a good point. However, you listed my family connections earlier, so you would prove to be quite foolish if your assistance was merely a pretense meant to cover wicked intentions.”

“Smart chit,” he muttered, unable to contain his smile when she shot him a sly grin.

Ah, yes.

Dangerous. Dangerous as hell.

Chapter 10

True to his word, Brahm introduced them as siblings when they arrived at the next inn and requested two separate rooms. Holly wasn't concerned about the temporary separation, suspecting she had applied her budding craft of ingenious flirtation rather well. And if his strained expression had not provided a significant clue, the fact that he was avoiding her at present would have done it.

Brahm had sent his apologies that he would not join her for dinner, so Holly opted to sup in her chambers. But unable to remain holed up in the tiny space for long, she had then gone off to explore the inn.

As one would not quite expect from such an establishment, the furnishings were ancient, and some were covered in dust. A faint musty scent hung in the air, a woody almond-like odor. It was the smell of aging traditions and old books. But there was a certain warmth to the environment, a snugness that Holly had not found in many other places. This particular inn was also in possession of a cozy and homely library. It was not as grand as one would expect from a posh residence, but the books were familiar and reminded Holly of home. So she curled up on a sofa and settled in with her thoughts.

She had assumed that she'd succeeded in making Brahm aware of her. Now she must find a way to tempt him. However, coy smiles and batting eyelashes were out of the question, not if she did not wish for him to suspect her intentions and run in the opposite direction.

Subtlety, Holly believed, was the best way to win Brahm over. So how to tempt him if not with the usual tricks? How to entice him into action—into a kiss?

Perhaps she ought to include words of seduction into her speech. It would require sharp wit above all, but if done delicately it might work.

Then again, it might not.

She was still mulling that over when a shadow hovered in the doorway, followed by a slender figure. A maid poked her head through the door. “My lady, y’re bath has been drawn.”

Her bath? Holly hadn’t ordered one, though relaxing in a hot tub did sound marvelous. With a slight shrug, she stood. Brahm must have ordered it for her, anticipating her needs.

Holly did not waste any time. Upon entering her chamber, she headed straight for the privacy screen and slipped out of her dress. Embroidered muslin pooled at her feet, and she stepped over the finely woven fabric.

Left only in her chemise, Holly caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror. Also belonging to Lady Josephine, this chemise must be, without question, one of Madam De La Frey’s creations. The material was virtually imperceptible from her skin and her breasts—and other delicate parts—which were visible through the translucent cloth.

It was beautiful, though.

Holly was slipping out of the airy garment when, over her shoulder, she noticed something odd. She paused.

Where was her tub filled with magical steamy water?

Her eyes swept the room with bewilderment as she whirled in a circle.

The maid had informed her, had even gone in search of her. So how was her bath not here? Then it dawned on her—they must have sent her bath to Brahm’s chamber, or rather, her brother’s chamber, instead of hers.

Drat.

She huffed out an irritated breath. Now she would need to wait for another one to be drawn up.

Unless . . .

Her eyes flicked to the connecting door that separated their bedchambers. Her brows knit together in thought. She recalled spotting Brahm out of her window earlier as he left for the stables with purposeful strides. It had been just as her supper arrived, not even an hour ago.

Her eyes traveled over the door in mild contemplation, intrigued by the idea of being naked in his room.

A delicious shiver feathered down her spine.

She spared another glance at the connecting doors, this time her lips quirking upward. Could she slip into his room, bathe, and slip out again, leaving only the used lukewarm water as evidence to spark his imagination? Could she do it?

Yes.

Holly snatched up a towel and tiptoed to the door separating the

chambers, resting her ear on the surface to listen for sounds of his presence, just in case. She clapped her hands together in excitement when no sound reached her ears.

Splendid!

Testing the doorknob, Holly was thrilled to find it unlocked. She snuck into the room before she lost her courage, closing the door with a gentle thud and leaning her forehead against the hard surface for good measure. This must be the most scandalous thing she had ever done in her life. Or third scandalous thing. Depending on how you ranked jilting a duke and driving across the country in the company of a marquis without a chaperone.

Closing her eyes, she inhaled the overwhelming fragrance of Brahm, the woody scent of sandalwood and fresh soap.

Wait, soap?

“Miss Middleton?”

Holly jumped as the force of those two words slammed into her like a brick wall, propelling her around in shock. The sight that met Holly startled her so much that the towel slipped from her fingers.

He raised himself from the tub, out of habit, she supposed, water sloshing over the edge of the tub and pooling over the floor.

Mother Mary!

Her eyes dropped to his torso, noting the hard ridges of muscle coated with droplets of water.

She rested her hand on the door for balance.

He opened his mouth, or at least she thought he did, likely to demand she leave, but, as she had, froze when his eyes fell on her revealing garment.

Sweet, merciful heavens!

That was the thought that came to mind upon lowering her gaze to find a nest of curls encircling a curious part of his anatomy, just as hard as the rest of him.

Holly swallowed.

Brahm had intended to go for a ride, had gotten as far as saddling his horse, even, before realizing he had forgotten his pocket watch—an item he could not leave without. He became so immersed in his surroundings when he rode that time fell away. And as he was currently guardian to London’s most troublesome Middleton, well, that might not be the wisest course of action. This was especially true when he recalled the way the countrymen ogled her as if she were a morsel ripe for the picking.

Perhaps he ought to have gotten on his horse and forgotten about

time. No Holly Middleton out there. No innocent touches and wide-eyed looks. None of the powerful responses she invoked from him—a deep, relentless, and ever-present hunger.

But he had returned to his room for his pocket watch, like a good little guardian, and had found a steaming tub of water waiting for him—and he was certain it was his room, given that his watch was right there on the bedside table. He'd glanced around the unoccupied area, wondering what a bath was doing there.

When no one appeared to explain the bath, he thought that perhaps Miss Middleton had ordered him one. Skeptical, Brahm had stared at it dubiously for a moment. Did women do that? Order baths for men?

What he needed was bloody distance, not this, this consideration. Cold water would be better suited to cool this unwelcome fever that rose in the wake of the temptation she presented. But the tub looked damn inviting. It would be such a shame let good hot water go to waste.

So, horse riding forgotten, he had shrugged out of his jacket and shirt, made quick work of his boots and breeches, and sunk into the bath of steamy water. A sigh of pleasure on his lips as the warm liquid soaked into his skin.

At last, he thought, just as the door suddenly cracked open and a small figure slipped into his room.

What the hell?

At first, his brain convinced him it was a maid, but the small figure wore a much too indecent item of dress. So flimsy, in fact, that the soft outline of her backside beckoned his eyes to fix solely on that spot.

With supreme effort, Brahm tore his gaze away from that delightful little behind so his eyes could roam up her elegant spine before landing on the back of her head and the short brownish hair that indicated her identity.

“Miss Middleton?” he nearly bellowed in his shock.

She spun around in fright and gasped, the towel clutched in her hand dropping to the floor. In reaction to her alarm, and without complete thought, Brahm rose from his bath but froze when crystal blue eyes locked with his.

Brahm's entire body awakened with lust. Raw. Primal. Vehement. His gaze dropped, taking in the length of her with renewed interest—and, thanks to his lapse in judgment, he was completely unconcealed.

His eyes shot back up to hers, finding her gaping at his nakedness. He watched in fascination as a flush crept up from her collarbone to tinge her cheeks in crimson.

Time passed as they stood appraising each other, sensibility slow to return. Much too bloody slow. So when it did arrive, it dawned as

swift as an arrow.

Brahm dropped back down into the tub, water splattering everywhere. Instantaneously, Holly snatched up the towel and clutched it to her bosom.

He waited, his breathing shallow, for her to say something or to flee the chamber, sure he must have frightened her maidenly sensibilities with the evidence of his desire.

She surprised him, however, when she demanded, "What is the meaning of this?"

Her voice snapped through the room, carrying no hint of hysterics at all.

Brahm felt himself scowl. "Should I not be directing that question at you?"

She pointed to the tub. "That is my bath!"

"As I am the sole occupant of this room, I beg to differ."

"It must have been sent to your chamber by mistake."

"Then I suggest you order another one, because as you can quite see, this one is already occupied."

Her hands moved to her hips, showcasing the delicate outline of her breasts.

Brahm's lips pulled downward in displeasure. "What the hell are you wearing?"

She gasped and lifted the towel once more to her bosom.

He wanted to rant and rave at the fact that she had obliterated the overly naïve, delicate image to which he had so desperately clung to avoid facing his own desire. She was his charge, for Christ's sake.

Frankly, the word *delicate* could no longer be used in the same breath as Holly Middleton. No delicate, innocent miss who saw a man fully naked and aroused would go on to point out that he had stolen her bath.

And that was trouble. Big trouble. She may be small, but Holly possessed the wicked curves of a woman—and now he was less wary of them.

"If you did not wish for me to wear such garments," she snapped back with a glower of her own, "you should not have packed them!"

Brahm clamped his mouth shut. He hadn't really packed anything but rather had snatched up whatever items he could find and tossed them into a suitcase. Should he have inspected every item? He was a man. A chemise was supposed to be a chemise. Not that translucent thing.

"And never mind what I'm wearing. You were supposed to be out riding," she continued, accusingly.

"I was!" Brahm snapped back. "But I forgot my watch."

"So you decided to steal my bath?"

Christ, did she have to look so glorious, all flustered and furious like that?

"I did not steal anything. It was in my room."

"Did you order it?"

Women and their bloody logic. "Since you are so damn adamant over the bath, you damn well know I did not order it."

That seemed to give her pause. "Neither did I," she murmured after a moment. "It appears the maid must have made an error, then. I had assumed that you had ordered it for me."

And Brahm had presumed the same of her. He heaved a heavy sigh, his body tightening in awareness of her proximity, reminding him once again of the impropriety of their situation.

"Miss Middleton," he began, because really, there was only so much improper he could manage at a time, "Please return to your chamber."

Her eyes flashed with challenge. "Not without my bath. I demand it back."

Bloody absurd.

"Woman! You try a saint!"

Brahm pinched the bridge of his nose, gathering his patience.

She opened her mouth to respond, but their argument was interrupted by a firm knock. They both paused, their heads whipping to the door.

"Is everything all right, sir?" It was the concerned voice of the innkeeper.

"Yes!" Brahm boomed.

"No!" Holly snapped.

Anger exploded in Brahm's chest as Holly marched to the door, towel clutched to her bosom, giving him ample view of her derriere.

"Don't you dare open that door, Holly!" he growled, but she ignored him and yanked it open to find the proprietor standing there with a worried frown.

"You delivered my bath to this cretin's room!" she declared without preamble.

The innkeeper blinked down at her, his gaze dropping to her scantily dressed figure before gulping down air.

Fury flared in Brahm's gut. "You did not even order a bath," he snapped, shooting the man a warning look.

The innkeeper took a step back.

"Well, there is a bath here, isn't there?"

"Holly!" Brahm growled from the bath, ready to take her over his knee. The bloody woman possessed no sense of propriety.

"Er, yes, miss. Your brother's bath was meant for another guest, but I'm sure we can, er, send up another one for you."

"No need. I shall take this bath. I just need you to remove my

brother so that I can bathe in peace.”

More bloody absurdness.

“This is my room!” Brahm growled.

The innkeeper peered into the room once again and, upon locking eyes with Brahm’s thunderous gaze, decided not to take part in whatever quarrel existed between the siblings and retreated with a hasty excuse of seeing to other guests.

Holly flung the door shut and arched a brow at Brahm’s murderous look.

“Fine,” he snapped, sensing this battle to be fruitless.

He rose from the bath, unashamed and furious, shooting her a triumphant glance when he heard her suck in a deep breath. If Holly Middleton wanted to act without modesty, he would damn well too.

She spun around, leaving him to jerk on his breeches, and when he finished, he marched past her to the connecting door. Holly wanted to bath in his space? Then he will recline in her bed.

“I’ll take a nap for an hour. Wake me when you are done,” he barked over his shoulder.

“I will be done much sooner than that,” she snapped back. “Since you already soaked up all the steaminess.”

Brahm said nothing, not trusting the words that threatened to erupt from his lips. Instead he only growled, a sound not unlike that of a crusty old bear, and left, slamming the door behind him with a loud thud.

Chapter 11

Holly stared at Brahm with wide eyes, uncertain if she had heard him correctly. He hadn't spoken a direct word to her since the previous day, when he had left her alone in his room to go and rumple her bed, spreading his scent all over her sheets. Even now his voice was still low and guttural with hostility. Not that she blamed him, mind you. Holly had entrenched on the beast's territory. And she had done so intentionally.

Heavens!

Every time she called to mind how he'd said her name during their argument, how he'd growled it on his lips, raw and deeply primitive, a delicious shiver tingled down her spine right to the tips of her toes. If she closed her eyes now, her brain imagined his mouth lowering to hers, his lips molding against hers with slow tenderness. She responded to his kiss in a light and playful way, teasing him—

“Miss Middleton.”

Holly blinked, the deep masculine voice of Brahm penetrating the swirl of her thoughts. Dear Lord! Even now the soft impatience sharply edging his tone brought her heart aflutter. It must be the close confines of the carriage and how his clean, manly scent permeated the air within.

“Yes?” she murmured, the word coming out in a breathless whisper.

He cast a dark scowl her way. “I said . . . come here.”

Holly glanced around the interior. “I am already here.”

“Do not play coy, Holly,” he held out his hand, “You wanted this, actively participated in having it come about, so now come here.”

Holly stared at Brahm, dumbstruck. Was he saying what she . . . did he want to kiss her? Here? Now?

But, of course, he wanted her!

This was her—

“Holly.”

A shiver of pure delight passed through her at the unrestrained desire in his voice. With not even the slightest bit of hesitation, she placed her hand in his palm. His entire hand swallowed hers as his fingers closed around her own. Before she could examine the sensation of their palms, flesh against flesh, he yanked her up against his chest.

“Are you going to kiss me?”

In response, he pressed his nose against the soft skin of her collarbone and inhaled. “As sure as I need to breathe.”

Holly’s head fell back when Brahm brushed his lips against her neck, moving up to the tender lobe of her ear. He bit down sensually there, and she whimpered.

“I much prefer you in that translucent little nightdress . . . within the hour.”

Within the hour? But they wouldn’t reach their destination that soon, would they? Confused, Holly shifted on his lap to pull away from him and ask, but her thoughts scattered the moment his hand lifted to cup her breast, his thumb grazing her nipple.

Mother Mary.

“I have wanted to do that since the moment we left the church.”

“You did?” She placed her hands on his shoulders, not to push him away but to keep herself steady. Her entire world felt unhinged. Well, everything except her senses, which appeared remarkably attuned to the marquis’s lips lightly grazing her ear as he spoke.

“Yes.”

His fingers began to tug on the pearl buttons of her dress, and another hand lifted her skirts, roaming the length of her leg. Holly, lost in the sensation of his tongue burning into her skin, did not protest when he laid her on the seat. Her breast now bared to his view, his hand began sliding over her most delicate, private—

“Holly.”

“Yes?”

Someone banged on the carriage door.

She lifted her lashes to stare into Brahm’s hypnotic emerald eyes. “Who could that be?”

“Me.”

“You? But you’re already here.”

“I’m no more here than you are.”

The banging grew louder.

“Don’t go,” Holly murmured when Brahm pulled away from her.

“I was never here, Holly.”

“Holly!”

She surged upright, her gaze darting around. She was in the familiar

chamber of the inn, not their carriage. And she was alone.

A dream. It had all just been a dream.

With a shaky breath, her eyes flicked to the door, her heart still laboring from the sinfully wicked fantasy. Loud banging on the door accompanied Brahm's voice.

"Damnation, Holly," he called out. He fiddled with the doorknob. "If you don't answer me this second I will kick this door in." This time the unmistakable note of a growl entered his voice, followed by louder banging.

Holly closed her eyes. Of their own accord, her lips parted, and her skin stained red as she recalled that same mouth caressing the skin of

She shook her head.

"I'll be ready," she croaked out, her voice still raspy from sleep.

There was a brief pause from the other side of the door, and then, after a moment, a softer whisper reached her ear. "Are you ill?"

Aye—mentally, perhaps.

"Not ill," she murmured in a clearer voice. "I'll be down shortly."

She waited until she was satisfied that his footsteps had retreated before she breathed a sigh of relief. The dream had been all too vivid, stamping a lasting impression right down on her soul.

Her fantasy must be the result of ogling his exceptional naked body. Not to mention that the image of him napping on her sheets had wreaked havoc with her imagination before bed. It was only natural, Holly told herself, that she found herself more than a little breathless as she rose to prepare for the day.

Forty minutes later, Holly descended the stairs to a brooding marquis. She remained silent as his eyes scrutinized her face for any sign of ailment. He needn't have bothered. What ailed her, no doctor could cure.

"I had the cook prepare a basket of bread and cheese," he muttered, his voice curt. "You can eat on the road."

Holly cast a frown his way. He seemed more out of sorts than usual. The bathing incident? It must be. Why else would he be in such a rush to be rid of her company?

Holly smothered a grin. She, the pale, waiflike girl, affected him, the big, brooding Marquis of Warton.

Perfect.

Secretly thrilled, she followed him outside to the awaiting carriage, pausing when an unbidden image of them arose in the exact spot where her dream had taken place. She blinked, recalling the evocative feel of his lips on her skin.

"Is something the matter?" Brahm said from behind her.

"No, not a thing," she murmured and deliberately took his spot,

forcing him to settle on the seat she usually occupied. Perhaps if they traded positions, she would not relive the wicked dream for the remainder of their journey. That would be torture, given its unlikelihood of becoming a reality, if his dark looks and furrowed brows were anything to go by.

He said nothing about the change of seating arrangements—only sent her a narrow-eyed look. Thus commenced the quiet carriage ride.

Holly settled more deeply into the corner, as far away from him as possible in an attempt to garner some space and privacy. She felt odd, unusually peculiar, having never dreamt about such wicked pleasures before, but then, never had Holly seen a naked man before.

What did transpire between husband and wife?

Of course, she knew a marriage must be consummated. But was there any pleasure involved? Would they both be naked? And shouldn't someone have told her before she'd nearly walked down the aisle?

Then again, who could have told her? Usually, that role belonged to a mother or a married sister. In her case, that obligation ought to have fallen on her cousin Belle, who appeared to have been too wrapped up in her own married life. It must have slipped her mind altogether.

Her sudden bewilderment put a pall on her victory. While Holly thought she had succeeded in her quest to unsettle Brahm, she had, quite unwittingly, discomposed herself in the undertaking.

Now Holly waged a battle against constant delight and terrible self-doubt. The man had seen her practically unclothed, and instead of appearing flustered and impassioned, he had withdrawn into a stony, aloof countenance. But then, his withdrawal could be because of suppressed desire. It was hard to ascertain.

Drat this confusion.

"Come here."

Holly's head whipped up, her heart expanding in her chest until she couldn't breathe. "I beg your pardon?"

He leaned forward, motioning for her to follow suit. Nervous, she did, unsure whether he was about to snatch her from her seat and ravish her lips. Or not.

"You have something in your hair."

And then he plucked a wayward leaf from her head and sat back in his seat again, oblivious to the wicked turmoil raging inside her.

"Thank you," she murmured, painfully awkward.

"I know the reason you jilted St. Ives, but why did you agree to marry him?"

His question was so abrupt that Holly jerked back in her seat. Challenge shone out from those dark, turbulent eyes.

There was no easy answer.

It occurred to Holly then how she must look to Brahm. She had accepted a proposal from a duke just one day after she'd met him, only to run away on the day of the wedding. It must reveal a complete lack of commitment on her part but also a profound sense of selfishness.

Her actions brought even more words to mind, such as *untrustworthy*, *reckless*, and *unreliable*. *Frivolous*. All undesirable traits—traits no man would want in a wife.

“Tell me, Brahm, do you find me desperate?”

His brows pulled together in a fierce scowl.

“Or overeager?”

“Desperately overeager?” His lips pulled downward. “Those are quite the words. In what manner do you mean?”

To fall in love.

“For anything, I suppose.”

“Miss Middleton, at the risk of being insulting, you are not making a wit of sense. The only desperate or eager thing I have witnessed from you is your running away from your wedding.”

Brahm had reverted back to propriety, something he did, Holly now recognized, when he wished to detach himself from any form of close familiarity.

A small smile escaped her. “You must think me shallow and imprudent for the mess I made with the duke.”

“On the contrary. I’ve no doubt you regret the trouble you caused; I am merely curious. You did not strike me as a woman with lofty aspirations.”

“I’m not. But you would never understand,” she said, averting her gaze.

“Perhaps not, but tell me anyway.”

She searched for the right words, for the truth beneath all the fairy tale.

“Very well. If you must know, I have envisioned my wedding since the first day I can remember,” she admitted, her mind transporting her back to her years as a child. “I’d arrive on a snowy white steed with flowers in my hair. Not much, mind you—just three soft pink roses and maybe a twig or two. The ceremony would be held in a charming garden setting. Oh, and the dress! It would be a marvelous creation—perhaps a cream silk gown covered in green feathers and rose-flower patterns with a pale yellow bow tied around the waist.”

Brahm’s sudden cough gave her pause.

Holly shot him a curious glance. “Is something the matter?”

“You just described a new breed of bird.”

At her gasp, he continued, unperturbed by her shock, “And neither does it explain the wedding you walked out from, nor answer my

question.”

Holly glared at him. “I was getting to that part,” she snapped, her chin lifting, “until you rudely interrupted me.”

“My apologies; please continue.” He had the good grace to look contrite.

“The thing is it never occurred to me that a dream wedding might not translate into a perfect marriage.”

“You did not think it strange that St. Ives proposed shortly after your first meeting?”

“It is not unheard of for a gentleman to declare his love soon after being introduced.”

“So you imagined he fell in love . . . at first sight.”

“Yes.” There was no apology in her answer.

Brahm nodded. “You are an idealist.”

“I prefer the word *romanticist*.”

“Does that word even exist?” He turned thoughtful. “Sentimentalist, then.”

Holly scoffed. “Call it what you will, but I believe in romance—the sort that is cloaked in glamour and mystery.”

“And how has that worked out?”

She sent him a wicked smile. “I cannot say. My story has yet to end.”

“I’d say it concluded with your sister receiving your wedding band.”

“True, but I choose to see that as the beginning of her story, not the end of mine.”

“And just how do you imagine your story ending?”

“In the arms of a man.”

An instant shade of red flushed over his skin.

Holly could not tell whether it was out of a sense of anger or something else entirely. It did, nonetheless, give her immense pleasure to observe.

“After you are married, I hope.”

“Marriage is the sensible option, is it not?” Holly murmured, hoping to lure a reaction from him, even if it were purely a jealous one. She needed to crack through this hard exterior of his, or she’d never get access to the passion she knew hid behind it. If she didn’t break through his barriers, they’d never have a chance to figure out what was between them—she’d never get him to see how wonderful falling in love could be. “Else I will forever be looking over my shoulder, wondering when St. Ives will find me.”

Holly had said the last in a teasing tone, but Brahm’s eyes hardened to stone.

Oh, for goodness sake! Was stony always the man’s fallback?

“You ought to take this more seriously . . .” He shook his head.

“Never mind. There is only so much reasoning a man can take from a woman.”

“How utterly male of you to point out,” she murmured, then lifted her chin. “I’ll have you know, I take nothing for granted.”

He ignored her, his jaw clenched as he said, “We will arrive at our destination by nightfall. I will remain the night but will be off at the break of day.”

Holly’s heart skipped a beat. Two beats. Three beats.

From the start, he had said he only meant to deliver her to a safe place. She had not, however, taken his declaration to heart—hadn’t thought he would truly leave her so swiftly.

“You are leaving me?” She couldn’t prevent the words from surging out of her mouth.

The insufferable lift of his thick, black brow annoyed her. He remained coolly detached as he studied her.

There must be a way for her to make him stay. Urge him to stay. Perhaps she could appeal to his more tender side? Which existed. Somewhere.

“That has been the arrangement from the very beginning. You will be quite safe there.”

Holly glanced away, her mind racing with possibilities. They needed more time, but she had no valid excuse to offer him to convince him to stay.

Doubt flooded her. Did she have it all wrong? She couldn’t be wrong about this, too, could she?

She glanced at him again. For a moment, she felt seared by the heat in his eyes before he glanced away.

There.

No, she wasn’t wrong. She just needed to make his control snap. But how? The man was a skittish stallion, and any direct attempt at flirtation, any direct attempt to kiss him might be met with rejection or, even worse, a scolding.

Perhaps she needed to incite his lust again? There had been a moment during the bathing incident that would have been promising had she not been so disoriented and irritated at the time. Perhaps she could forget a towel when she bathed and urge him to bring her one? Or she could pretend to be cold, hide all the blankets, and be forced to sleep in the same bed as he?

Holly bit her lip, debating.

For the love of all things, why couldn’t this man just kiss her?

Chapter 12

They arrived at his estate just before nightfall. A modest strip of land with a quaint two-story cottage, it was about an hour's drive from the nearest village, from civilization. The air was crisp, and the initial slight breeze rapidly strengthened into a mighty wind. Thunderclouds ahead signaled a storm. The sharp burst of air swept up her hair, tugging her small frame in the direction it desired.

Holly cast a nervous glance to the clouds. Storms were not uncommon in these parts, but they did wreak havoc with the terrain, known at times to even demolish houses not built sturdily enough. Her gaze drifted to her temporary home in a skeptical frown.

She stumbled over her feet when another gust of wind propelled her sideways. A solid arm snaked around her waist then, hefting her tightly against his rock-hard body. She'd never been so grateful for the wind—or the support.

Locked together, they dashed for the house, her shorter strides battling to keep up with his long, stronger ones. A loud curse rang in her ears, and she was lifted, much as she imagined a sack of potatoes would be, and deposited over his shoulder.

Holly did not even squeak a protest as Brahm ran with her into the house. Indeed, she enjoyed the contact. It was jarring—to say the least—but his hand gripped her thighs just below her buttocks, leaving a warm imprint.

Too soon he lowered her to the steady floor of the parlor.

His eyes blazed as they boldly roamed her before he nodded once, turned on his heel, and ran for the door.

"I need to secure my horse," Brahm said. "The coachman refuses to stay, he is returning to the village."

"Is he mad? He might not make it back in this weather!"

“Tell that to his stubborn hide,” he shouted over his shoulder, as he disappeared into the tempest.

With a sigh, Holly circled the parlor, inhaling the musky scent of the uninhabited space. All men were stubborn, it seemed.

She wandered to the drawing room, noting that some but not all of the furniture had been covered with white sheets. This made her think that no servants had occupied the home for some time.

The sudden sound of her stomach rumbling gave her pause, drawing her attention to her hunger. And with it came a more pressing question. Did they have any food? And if not, did Brahm mean for her to survive on her own, picking berries and hunting rabbits?

Holly would never kill a rabbit or pluck feathers from a bird. About the only thing she could do was bake bread. Or rather, knead the dough that one used to bake bread. Would Brahm at least show her how to use an oven? If he even knew how to use one.

Then it struck her, like the sudden clap of thunder outside that illuminated the entire room.

They were alone for the night.

With a storm brewing outside!

The eventual downpour might rage for days, or it might pass after the night. But it was the perfect opportunity to seize the moment. Or attempt to.

Holly loved storms, the wildness of them. She even marveled at the loud booming sound that crackled through the sky. Come to think of it, it reminded her of Brahm, with his often-dark countenance and crackling voice.

A sudden idea formed in her mind.

Brahm was not aware that she loved storms. And if one thing had become clear these past few days, it was that the surly marquis could not resist assisting a damsel. It was in his nature to protect. And that, as it so happened, provided the perfect footing to get closer to him without spooking him off.

So how to awaken his protective instincts?

Holly considered venturing outside and then pretending to be overcome by distress. Most people were frightened by thunder, right? But did she honestly wish for him to perceive her as a mad, hysterical girl?

She shook her head, disregarding the idea.

But what else could she do?

Just let fate take its course.

Yes, yes. But she had trusted fate once before. With St. Ives. Dare she do so again with Brahm?

When it came to matters of the heart, Holly was now more convinced than ever to fight for what she wanted. How had the poet,

John Lyly, expressed his sentiments: "The rules of fair play do not apply in love and war."

And indeed, she agreed, they did not.

She was determined to unravel the promise their futures might hold—together. And yes, perhaps she was a tad theatrical in her approach, but for Holly, this was the way with love. Indeed, she would not give up until she had done her best to break his stubborn, aloof exterior. Let them both go up in flames one way or another. At least then she'd know.

The thudding of oncoming boots running toward the house signaled that her time had run out.

Her head swiveled around the room, and she dashed to one corner only to turn and bolt to another one.

Think, Holly!

The front door opened and shut.

"Miss Middleton? Holly?"

Startled by the unexpected call of her name colliding with the crack of thunder, Holly jumped and let out a little shriek. Another role of thunder brightened the sky, and Brahm appeared in the threshold, his face illuminated by silver light.

Well, it's too late do anything now.

"Holly? Christ, are you all right?"

Er, yes . . . ?

"Bloody hell."

What was this?

He reached her in four strides. Thunder now shook the room as lightning tore through the night, the storm picking up momentum.

Brahm's expression tightened. His eyes bore into hers. "You should have told me you're afraid of storms."

At first, Holly was so dumbstruck she didn't know what to do. Did she just stand there, gazing up at him, or did she set him straight? Holly Middleton, afraid of storms? Not likely.

But then as his arms gathered her close against his firm chest, and the earthy smell of his scent filled her senses, Holly knew exactly what to do.

She wrapped her arms around him and embraced him back.

In one fluid motion, she was gathered up in his arms and carried from the room.

Finally.

Was it too much to ask to remain in his arms forever?

Holly sighed in pleasure.

Of course, that was not how he interpreted the sound.

"Devil take it," he muttered, his strides quickening.

And then he surprised her by starting up a hum, a low melodious

tune meant to calm her. And, sure enough, the sweetness of the action weaved a spell over her heart.

Too soon they reached the bedchamber, and she was set down on the bed.

"I'll light a fire for the cold," he murmured, moving away from her.

She watched as he knelt down before the hearth, the motion of his body hypnotic as he stacked wood. The last thing she wanted to do was cause him any concern.

The rules of fair play do not apply in love and war, she reminded herself when a pinch of guilt surfaced.

Her gaze flicked over the orange wallpaper covering the walls. She wrinkled her nose. It wasn't the dreamy sunset kind of orange but the kind that couldn't decide whether it wanted to be yellow or red or something else.

Not the stuff of romance.

Whoever decorated this room possessed a deplorable sense of taste.

Her eyes were still wide from the color shock when Brahm turned to her, a fire now crackling in the hearth.

Gah! More orange!

Of course, though she had completely forgotten her hunger, her belly chose that moment to protest at the lack of food.

He rose to his full height. "There should be provisions in the kitchen; I will be right back."

He returned with an assortment of bread and cheeses just as lightning struck and illuminated the chamber in a fine dazzling color, casting his stark features in brilliance.

Their eyes locked. Time seemed to stop.

For a long moment, they stared at one another. Orange faded from her vision. Something—the cottage, the bed, the entire world—shifted. And shifted. And shifted.

And then the spell passed.

He strode forward, five steps exactly, and stopped. Holly's eyes never left his as he lowered his head to hers. Then they drifted shut as she felt him place a soft kiss on her temple.

She was in heaven.

He lifted her chin, his fingers lingering against her skin. "I just realized," he said, tilting his head to the side, "that had there been a storm on the day of your wedding, you would have sprinted down the aisle instead of from it."

Little did he know, she would have gladly darted into a storm to escape her wedding.

"Maybe," Holly murmured, not wishing to lie outright. "But perhaps I would have taken my chances with violent gusts of wind and thunder."

"And perhaps the storm would have welcomed you for the tempest you are in your own right," he said, letting her go and spreading the food he brought from the kitchen on the bed.

"A tempest? I have never been compared to a storm before."

"Quite apt, I should say, since you whirled your way into my life."

He sounded suspiciously annoyed by that.

What Holly really wanted him to say was that she had whirled her way into his heart. But for now she would settle for being compared to a wild storm. She quite liked that.

The unexpected warm brush of his fingers against her cheek caused her to jerk in response. Misinterpreting her reaction, he pulled away from her and tugged back the covers.

"You will be warmer beneath the quilt," he muttered, ushering her underneath.

To her disappointment, he settled on the mattress beside her but remained on top of the covers.

"What do you do when there are storms at home?"

What, indeed, she inwardly mused. "I . . ." she paused, her mind racing with possibilities. What did one do if one were scared of storms? She had no idea. She and her sisters delighted in them—loved them. "Poppy once built a fort of blankets, and Willow read novels to us the entire night."

There. Not a complete lie. They had done that once, and a storm had raged outside at the time.

"Sounds interesting."

Holly nodded. "But let us not talk about that. Tell me about your life," she urged, hoping to venture away from the topic of her deception. Of course, he would eventually discover the truth. Just not tonight, she hoped.

"Have you always had such an inquisitive mind?" he asked, but then said, "Never mind, I see that you have. In any case, by some good fortune, my life is fairly ordinary."

"Really?"

He shrugged. "I was a boy when my parents' death left me to act as the surrogate father and mother—the latter a much more impossible task—to my sister."

So he had been guardian to Josephine that long? No wonder he was so protective. That was a tremendous task for a youth to take on. But he'd done well, Holly thought. Josephine was happily married now to the Marquis of St. Aldwyn, a task that Holly herself had helped with thirteen months ago. And she adored her brother, even if she enjoyed driving him mad more—Holly knew that much.

"That sounds anything but ordinary."

He was an extraordinary man to think so.

His lips twitched. "Perhaps not. Josephine is every bit as stubborn as my mother. I heard a tale about how she had once refused to be left behind on a hunt and so donned the attire of a boy to fool my father into taking her with them."

"Did the disguise work?" Holly asked, shocked.

"No, but he took her along anyway."

Holly smiled at the pride she heard in his voice. The adoration in his tone overshadowed the fierce scowl that knitted across his brows. It was quite clear that their family had been close.

Snatching up a piece of cheese, she considered him. Brahm was sorely misunderstood. Most steered clear of him because of his booming voice and blustering temper—and she suspected he preferred it that way. But his moodiness, at least for her, paled in comparison to the apparent evidence of his unfailing love and dedication to his family.

"You miss your sister terribly, don't you?" she asked, quietly.

"Is it that obvious?" He helped himself to some bread.

"Glaringly so. You even cast your lot in with me because you missed her shenanigans."

His chest vibrated with laughter. "That I have."

Quelling a most peculiar shiver, Holly lifted her head to stare at him. He planned on leaving her as soon as the storm cleared, but she could not think about such depressing things just now.

"I don't remember much of my mother," she said after a while. "But I see her every day in the love my father feels for her still."

"It must be a painful sight to behold."

"On the contrary, it is the sort of love I have always been searching for, the kind that cannot be extinguished, even in death."

Holly felt him tense beside her. Her heart drummed in her ears as she waited anxiously for him to say something. Anything.

For a long disquieting moment, silence stretched between them, and she thought it might reach into eternity. So when he, at last, spoke, his words—in a thick drawl that slid right into her, filling her with languid warmth—settled right in her soul.

"You deserve nothing less."

Those words were, in a sense, deeply romantic. Hardly anyone would agree with him. Society argued that it was not a lady's duty to be happy and certainly not to find love. Procuring a good match was all that mattered. Love was reserved for books and fairy tales. That fact had never stopped Holly from defying society and its absurd beliefs.

"Everyone deserves it," she murmured, settling deeper into the covers.

Outside, the storm raged, lightning flashing and thunder booming.

Inside, they were safe and warm—and together. She felt it then. That driving force that always had her searching, hoping, wishing. She wanted love. She wanted happiness. She wanted it all.

And she wanted it all with Brahm.

If only they could agree on that.

“Not everyone is as lucky as those who achieve it,” Brahm said, interrupting her thoughts.

Holly turned her head to stare at him. “Achieve it? One does not achieve love. Love, in all its magical properties, achieves us.”

“That is a romantic sentiment, Miss Middleton, and implies that love is sentient, reactive.”

Ah, Miss Middleton again, am I? She must have gotten close again.

“Or just magical,” she pointed out. “Would it not be marvelous to think of it as such?”

“It would certainly confuse plenty of people.”

“I believe that confusion is the point of it all. One begins to question life and its meaning when one gets confused.”

In the distance, more thunder rolled, as if nature agreed with her statement.

“You have an answer for everything,” Brahm muttered.

“A woman’s trait.”

He grunted. “I sent word ahead from London. A maid and a cook should arrive once the storm lets up. They will stay for your duration.”

Her heart burned in protest, even though her lips remained sealed. “You are a strange man, Brahm Tremont.”

“I told you, I’m the most ordinary man you’ll ever meet.”

“If by ‘ordinary’ you mean a moody lord whose voice can raise the dead, then yes, you are the most ordinary man in the world.”

He shot her a look as if to say, “I am not a bloody moody lord.”

She bit her bottom lip. He really was.

He rose to gather the remaining provisions that they’d left uneaten, and the loss of his warmth was immediate; she felt it deep in her bones.

Holly swallowed the objection gathering in her throat. Would she feel this way every day if she failed to win his affection? She had never felt such a longing for a person before.

A deep ache in her chest left her breathless for a moment.

Holly saw the truth then, glimpsed the possibility of the same future that haunted her father awaiting her if she did not win Brahm’s heart . . . The thought was too awful to contemplate.

Chapter 13

Brahm had never put much stock in his name. After all, it was just a name. Everyone had one. To him, a name held more meaning for the person who bestowed it than for the person upon which it was bestowed. Besides that, few called him by his given name, Josephine being on the forefront. He would even venture as far to say that precious few people even knew his Christian name. After all, what was a name compared to the title a man carried?

At least, that was how he thought until his name was purred from Holly Middleton's lips.

With longing.

In her sleep.

It had been a whisper of breath, but he had caught it.

Brahm.

And he felt the precious hold on his carefully constructed world slip. She had said everyone deserved love. But he'd never thought of marrying for love. For so long, his whole life had been about duty—his duty to the title, his commitment to Josephine, his responsibility to honor his parents' memory. His duty to sire an heir.

All this time, even though his parents had loved one another and his sister had married for love, Brahm had never truly considered the possibility for himself.

And why the hell should he? He was a man, and men did not lounge around mooning over love matches. They did what needed to be done when it ought to be done. The end.

Wasn't that the way of things?

He cast one last look over his shoulder to where Holly lay slumbering. She was so bloody beautiful it hurt not to look at her.

Outside, the rain made no promise of passing. So neither would he.

He turned and strode from the chamber. Christ, just in descending the stairs, his lungs heaved as if he had run a great distance with the hounds of hell nipping at his heels. All the while a brilliant, feverish storm raged inside him.

All because one woman had whispered his name.

What a bloody mess.

And, to his mortification, it only then occurred to him that he had never left word to Josephine of his departure. That was highly out of character for him.

He checked his pocket watch. It was a quarter to noon. They had slept the entire morning, and he was famished. He also still wore the same clothes as the day before, now rumpled and creased. His valet would be horrified.

Brahm shot a glare toward the front entrance, his dark scowl aimed at the storm, which trapped him inside the cottage with the biggest temptation he had ever faced.

Earlier, he had awoken to find Miss Middleton draped over his chest, her limbs entwined with his. He had scarcely been able to breathe in that moment.

Dammit—he had gone to bed above the damn covers with her beneath them. How the hell had she ended up on top of him?

Taking a deep breath, he raked a hand through his hair. It had been pure torment to wake with such a painful erection that he could not ease any more than he could escape to London in the storm. Even now his body was alive with fire.

But he was her guardian. Her protector.

And supposed to be a bloody gentleman.

It had taken every bit of his strength to untangle himself from her and slip away. And, as punishment—he was certain—a low moan of objection had escaped her full, parted lips. Followed by his name.

He cursed again at the memory.

His fists clenched at his sides as he struggled to control the urge to return to her.

The winds howled against the windows, mocking him, keeping him caged in this house alone with her. This snare of nature alone possessed the power to snap him in two.

But it was not Holly's fault that her innocent touches enflamed him. Of course, his lack of control over his own body and emotions served to annoy him further. He should be able to ignore the feelings her touch brought on. For some reason, he couldn't.

He should have retired to his room or slept in the chair. Or on the floor. But no, he had wanted to remain close to her in case the thunder frightened her more. Frankly, sleeping outside amid the storm would have been better than staying in bed with her.

But the way she had looked, eyes as wide as a terror-stricken doe's, standing so small and alone in the drawing room . . . it had undone him. To leave her now, even if he could manage it, would be like slitting his wrists.

And what of tomorrow? Or the day after that, when the heavens had ceased pouring, and the loud clap of thunder was a thing of the past?

Brahm shook his head. It would still feel as though a vein had been opened. Because what happened when another storm hit, and he wasn't with her to comfort her?

It's not your damn concern.

But it was. She had trusted him to take care of her.

You like her, Warton, just admit it.

Brahm snorted. He most certainly did not like Holly Middleton. What did the word *like* even mean? It seemed such a little word, such an insignificant word.

You tolerate or you do not tolerate. You indulge or you do not indulge. You enjoy or you do not enjoy. You desire or you do not desire. And if you do all of the above, you are smitten; if you don't, you are not.

It was as simple as that.

Only, he did tolerate her company well enough, which was a rarity for his solitary self. In fact, he didn't just tolerate her; he indulged her whimsical ways, and he bloody enjoyed doing it. He enjoyed her. Hell, he desired her. That was evident from his nearly constant arousal. Which left him to conclude that he was well and truly smitten with Holly Middleton.

Sweet Lord.

The revelation struck him hard.

He desired a chit that believed in fairy tales and magical things.

If Josephine could see me now.

Admittedly, Holly's notions of fairy tales and love had given him pause, but they did not leave a taste of horror in his mouth—not as they would have a year ago, perhaps. And, as her lifelong crusade to find Prince Charming had not sent a frisson of fear into his heart, and nor had learning that she had kissed half a village, he must be just as bloody mad as she was. Which, he decided in a moment of clear reflection, he bloody likely was.

Brahm pressed his lips together in a grim line, glancing out the window again. They could be stuck together for days. How did a man go about living with a woman who was not his sister but also not his wife? Not that Brahm would know how to live with a wife, either. He had no bloody idea what he was doing.

He ought to leave.

He ought to brave the winds and downpour until he reached the village, where he could stay until the storm passed.

But an uncomfortable tightness seized his heart at the thought.

Holly had entirely turned his world inside out. Which didn't sit well with him, but he couldn't ignore it, either.

A decision regarding Holly Middleton had to be made. That much, at least, remained clear.

Would he stay when the storm passed, or would he go? The logical answer was to leave when the rain did. It was safest. But would it be so remiss if he delayed his return? Continued to inhale the very air she occupied? Endure the soft ring of her laughter day in and day out? Stare into those dreamy, hypnotizing blue eyes at every opportunity for the rest of his life?

Blast it all to hell!

No.

He couldn't.

Absolutely not.

Not without marrying her. And given that she had just run from one wedding, it was unlikely she'd dash into another.

What Brahm needed was to go out for a long ride to settle his worn nerves. Once on his horse, open fields spread before him, wind whipping through his hair, he would be able to think straight. But since he couldn't go for a ride, he'd find another distraction.

Straightening his shoulders with grim purpose, he marched toward the kitchen. Unfortunately, they would be weathering this storm on bread, cheese, some fruit, and a bit of almonds. The food, however, should be enough to last. But first, a strong cup of coffee would go a long way in improving his mood.

Brahm had never developed a taste for the weak flavor of tea. In fact, it quite literally made him shudder whenever it passed his lips.

Rummaging through the cupboards, he found no coffee. He did, however, find some cocoa beans.

"Close enough," he muttered to himself.

How different could it be from brewing coffee? A bit, he guessed. Though he did once read an article on the art of creating a delicious cup of hot cocoa in the *London Times*.

Grind the cocoa beans.

Hunt for some spice.

He gave a shout of approval when he found cinnamon and vanilla.

Crush a few of their dwindling almonds.

Explore for some chilies and add to the mixture.

After crushing the ingredients together, preparing the desired paste, and bringing it all to boil in a pot of steamy water, Brahm stood back with a triumphant grin. He'd managed to make hot chocolate.

“You should stir that,” a soft, slightly amused voice murmured from the door.

Brahm’s pulse leaped. The fruity zest of her scent reached him even before he’d fully turned around.

Holly stood in the threshold, looking edible in the same soft, pale yellow day dress she’d worn yesterday. Her eyes darted over the glorified mess on the table where he’d been working.

Brahm.

Damn that purr of his name. Would it never leave his brain?

“How long have you been standing there?” he demanded. His words were rudely spoken and blasted out harshly. He hadn’t meant them to be, but she unsettled him as no other woman ever had. He was edging near his breaking point.

Little Miss Daylight, on the other hand, seemed unperturbed by his lack of warmth. A soft smile curved her lips. “Long enough to discover you are not an entirely sour beast.”

He snorted and turned away in search of a wooden spoon to froth the mixture.

“I’m ravenous,” she continued, wading into the kitchen, invading his space and claiming his air.

“We don’t have much,” he confessed, “but it will be enough to outlast the storm.”

Then she suddenly appeared beside him, leaning over his pot of hot chocolate and inhaling deeply.

“Oh! It smells delicious!”

Brahm grunted. *Not as appetizing as you.*

Their eyes found each other, and he stilled, waiting for the familiar clench of his gut, the rapid start-up of his heart. He watched, spellbound, as she reached up and brushed a finger over his cheek, her brows puckered in thought.

Bloody hell.

“You have gathered quite some dust,” she murmured.

“It’s from the cocoa beans.” His voice sounded raspy. Too raspy.

Restless, he took a step back, and her arm fell to her side. She said nothing, only took hold of the spoon, which he had abandoned, and started to stir.

“Perhaps we should go on a picnic,” she suggested.

A what?

Brahm cast a scowl her way. He would rather not dignify her ludicrous suggestion with a reply.

“I thought maybe the library would be an excellent spot,” she continued happily, stirring the hot chocolate.

“You want to picnic in the house?” Brahm would never understand her.

She glanced at him and rewarded him with a smile. The air left his lungs.

“Why not? There isn’t much else to do.”

Right, but picnics were intimate. They were things that lovers did, that courting couples did.

A refusal hovered on his lips, but what rolled out was a snappish “Fine.”

“Marvelous!” she exclaimed, performing a little jump up and down. “I do so love to picnic!”

Brahm groaned in reply. What the hell had he just agreed to? He could not, however, extinguish her excitement just because he loathed spending his time in fanciful diversions. He could just see how the conversation would go.

What is not to like? She’d ask. And he’d reply with an irascible retort along the lines of, *Sitting on the ground while my ass becomes numb, eating stale bread and talking about what an outstanding day it is for having a picnic in a library.* And then he’d ruin her fun.

Brahm shut the curtain on his sour thoughts when her gaze narrowed on him.

“If you’d rather not—” she started to say, but he interrupted her. “I said it was fine,” he barked out, and then in a gentler tone, managed, “I’ll gather a basket.”

“And I’ll gather a tea set for the hot chocolate.”

He nodded and was about to set out to do just that when she began humming a merry tune.

He snuck a sidelong glance at her. She simply did not react to his boorish ways as a regular lady would. Not that he would ever admit to being that boorish, though his sister forever complained about it. But the fact of the matter was that Holly Middleton simply accepted people as they came, warts and all. And Brahm had a big bloody wart in regard to his attitude. Holly seemed to cast a calming influence over him. Damn strange, that.

His pulse raced when he recalled once again that the duke wanted her to marry his brother, some young buck who might very well hold no regard for her happiness. Which would eventually steal the bright tone from her voice.

Of course, at first, she would be accepting, as was her nature, but after a time, years even, a vacant look would no doubt replace the spark, and a cynical stretch would curve her once impish lips.

Brahm had seen it happen often enough to chits like her. Had glimpsed what a careless partner could accomplish. It was why, to some extent, he had steered clear of the marriage mart. As a man with a churlish temper and a profoundly protective nature, Brahm had never wanted to be the cause of his wife’s unhappiness. Which was

why he had to pick wisely.

Now he found himself dead center in a situation in which he could no longer form any clear lines to separate honorable intentions from desirable ones. Guileless and starry-eyed, Holly Middleton seemed to receive him as a whole, embracing his good along with his gruffness.

And that was quite dangerous indeed.

Chapter 14

Holly paused in the act of arranging a quilt she had discovered in one of the rooms to cast a sidelong glance at Brahm. His expression was pained, as though he had stubbed his toe against a bureau and was trying to be a man about it.

She hid a smile. Nothing would make him anything less than a hard, testy, browbeating male in the eyes of the world, but she saw more to him. He possessed a solid strength about him. His sense of honor extended to his determination to never dishonor a lady. His he-man behavior was just his protectiveness shining through. Besides, she rather liked his brooding ways. It was a terribly romantic trait, after all.

Brahm was, in many ways, the champion she'd always dreamed of, especially when it came to how he'd saved her from the duke. Honestly, Holly was not overly worried about the duke. Yes, the man made a formidable enemy, but Willow stood by his side. The fact remained that her sister was an ally. And she had faith that her sister would prove a challenge to the duke, too.

"Did you sleep well?" Brahm asked, interrupting her musings. There was a curious note in his voice.

Her gaze flicked to his. "Yes, thank you. I slept like a dream."

He appeared amused by her words. "Dreams do not sleep."

"True, but if I had slept terribly, then I would say, 'I slept like a nightmare.'"

"Interesting reference. Do you know that you talk in your sleep?" he murmured, his voice deceptively low.

Holly stilled, her heart dropping into her stomach.

Oh, yes, she knew.

When they were young, her sisters had complained endlessly about

the same thing. And, apparently, when she did talk in her sleep, she only ever talked about her latest love interest. They forever whined that they did not wish to know that John Braggart had the biggest cinnamon eyes or that Charleston Jordan had good strong arms to sweep her up into his embrace. They also told her they would rather not know that she had a childhood crush on a pirate, one she had read about in a book.

Mortification stained her cheeks.

The last thing she wanted to do was make Brahm wary with her ramblings . . . about him.

She turned to face him, admiring the vast expanse of his chest, his sharp jawline, and his thick brows set in his strong face. He also possessed big hands.

What if she had said something about those large hands gripping her waist? Or that his strong legs could easily carry her up any stairs?

Then Holly suddenly recalled that she had glimpsed him naked. What if she had remarked on his manhood?

Dear Lord, what if she had said something to the extent of, *My, my, what magnificent virility you possess!*

Holly's ears burned. She racked her mind to recall what she had dreamed of last night. She could never know what she had said, but her dreams could usually give her some clue. Which meant, in this case, she could have uttered any number of things, like *troll-duke* or *kissing under the midnight sky*.

Holly shook her head to clear her mind. It was a moot point to deliberate over what she might have said when she could just ask him directly, however humiliating.

Inhaling a deep breath, she pushed out a strangled reply. "What did I say?"

He settled crossed-legged on the quilt, and she followed suit, arranging her skirts around her knees effortlessly, while he, no doubt, took note of her molten cheeks.

"You spoke my name."

A breath of relief tore from her lungs.

His name did not warrant too much mortification. It was, however, extremely telling, should he wish to reflect on the matter.

"I had a dream about you," Holly confessed after a moment, setting out the bread.

He took the steamy chocolate she handed him, his eyes never leaving hers as she brought her mug up to her lips. Her admission seemed to take him aback. It was more than mere surprise, though, for his lower jaw and neck flushed, and he went completely still.

Emerald eyes burned into hers with a tangible intensity. "You dreamed about me?"

Holly gave a shaky nod, gripping her hot mug to keep her hands from trembling.

“What did you dream?” he asked.

“Oh, this and that,” she murmured, offering him a small smile before taking a sip of her drink, which she promptly expelled back into the mug in the most unladylike manner.

“Mother Mary!” Holly exclaimed. “What did you add to this drink?”

He glanced down at his cup with a frown, sniffing it. “Whatever I could find.” His brows drew together as he took a sip and then grimaced.

“Perhaps if we add a touch of sugar it will lighten the taste? I can go retrieve some?”

His eyes narrowed on her. “First, tell me what you dreamed.”

“I cannot do that,” she murmured, dabbing at the bit of hot chocolate that had not landed back in her cup, hoping he would leave well enough alone.

But Brahm would not be distracted so easily. “Tell me,” he urged.

Her lips parted and shut again. How could she admit her steamy dreams to him? And it had been another delicious dream, not one she could ever confess. She might, however, admit to one small detail of her dream, even if only to test the waters with a tiny ripple. But dare she? What would he make of it? As simple as the act was, it would reveal so much of her desires.

“You kissed me,” she finally admitted, not meeting his gaze.

The words hovered between them just as the storm clouds above their haven did. Wild. Unpredictable. Tempestuous.

“I kissed you?” He sounded oddly stunned.

Her gaze lifted to his.

Holly bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing at his astonished expression; only she bit down too hard and grimaced. Once again he noticed and misunderstood the action.

“I see you are horrified by the prospect.”

“No!” she exclaimed. “That is, I meant it was pleasant enough.”

“Pleasant? That is how you would describe my kiss?”

He sounded so offended that Holly bit down on her lip. “How would you describe it, then?”

“It wasn’t my dream, so how would I know?”

“Well, you have kissed women before, have you not? How did they find it? As I’ve kissed my share of boys, I know my kisses are enjoyable, to say the least. And yours were. Enjoyable, that is. In my dream. Is enjoyable better than pleasant? Though, of course, compared to the rest of the dream—” her words died on her lips when she saw his eyes spark to life.

Holly was rambling, she knew, but being the subject of his hot

regard had her floundering for words. How had she ever thought to tell him would be a good idea?

“There was more than kissing in your dream?”

Her gaze locked with his shocked one. *Do not say anything else!*

He appeared to be well and truly unsettled by the prospect. Already the color in his cheeks had deepened, burning down his throat and disappearing beneath his shirt. That was another thing Holly admired about him. He wore his emotions on his sleeve. Any other man would have hidden his reaction, schooled his features to a blank mask. But not Brahm.

“What did you dream?”

There was the flicker of complete knowing in his gaze that made Holly tear her eyes away from him and glance at their picnic spread.

She had always used this defense mechanism: whenever you wished to avoid a dangerous or unwanted topic, stuff something edible in your mouth, take a sip of a drink, or, if all else failed, descend into a coughing fit.

Holly snatched up a slice of cheese to delay any reply. But before she could part her lips, his hand manacled her wrist, his head lowering to hers.

“What did you dream?” Every inch of his focus fixed on her then, and Holly felt his words right down to her bones.

Your hands lifted my skirts.

You touched me, trailing your fingers from my feet up to my thigh.

She would not say it. It was out of the question.

“A lady does not kiss and tell.”

His lips twitched. “You told me about the kiss,” he pointed out. “Might as well tell me the rest of the dream.”

She lifted her shoulders in a shrug. “A kiss is a kiss.”

He leaned forward until his lips were bare inches away from hers. “Yet a dream is not just a dream.”

Oh! Chocolate tinged his breath. And his eyes blazed with heat.

“What else could it be?” she whispered, dazed by the effect he had on her.

“That I have yet to discover.” He paused, his expression painful. “Or perhaps your dream is to kiss every damn man in the kingdom to find your prince.”

“I only have the urge to kiss one man.”

Her confession stretched between them, the moment creating a distracting pull, drawing them together one breath at a time. It was impossible to tell what existed beyond the blaze Holly saw in Brahm’s eyes.

“You are a dangerous woman, Holly Middleton.”

Dangerous.

A thrill of excitement rippled down her spine. No one had ever referred to her as such. Silly, yes, outspoken, and often even irrational, but never anything as tantalizing as *dangerous*.

"How threatening can one woman be?"

"As perilous as one kiss," he said, his eyes dropping to linger on her lips.

"I suppose there is only one way to find out exactly how treacherous," Holly murmured, but in her mind, all thoughts revolved around two words: kiss me, kiss me, kiss me.

He jerked in response, as if it took all of his strength not to lean forward and claim her mouth.

"It is reckless to stir the waters of fate."

Kiss me.

"Tempting fate might be wild and unpredictable, but it could be downright smashing, too." Her voice had come out a breathless whisper, pleading for something more. For the leap of faith she wished for him to take, for the choice he had to make for himself.

He dragged one hand over his face before his dark eyes locked with hers once more. Perhaps it had been too much. Brahm was a man of strict moral code. Maybe he couldn't see it as something other than a dishonor to her.

She was just about to scoot over and give him some distance when he cursed, tightened his fingers around her wrist, and tugged her onto his lap.

"Holly."

His ragged whisper cascaded along her nerves, just as his lips came crashing down to seize hers in an achingly tender kiss.

She had been kissed before, many times, but never like this. Never this slow, this sensuous. For a moment she sat stunned, allowing his firm lips to mold over hers. Then her arms circled his neck, and she kissed him back.

And then everything else ceased to matter.

Then he pulled back slightly and their eyes met.

"Tell me to stop."

"Not yet." Not ever.

His lips brushed over hers again. "Is this how it was in your dream?"

"Almost."

"Was there more?"

She was going to hell for encouraging this, but she nodded anyway.

He traced his tongue over her lower lip, and her world tilted. Or was that him? She suddenly felt the floor against her back.

Oh, yes, hell awaited her.

She was light-headed and dizzy, way past any rational thought—

and so, apparently, was he, because the next thing she knew, Brahm's hands were lifting the hem of her skirts and sliding the material upward.

"What about this? Did I do this?" He traced the length of her leg with his palm.

"Perhaps."

Then his hand cupped her core. The shock of that erotic action stopped her breathing. As though she was suspended in time. Her spine tingled, and gooseflesh sprinkled over her entire body.

It was all Holly could do not to splinter into pieces when his consummate fingers parted the most intimate part of her and slipped inside. She felt a shudder convulse his body, and for a moment she feared he might stop, but blessedly, passion appeared to strip him of any constraint, because he began to stroke her instead.

"Tell me I did this."

Holly closed her eyes. She hadn't even known this was possible. She shouldn't allow him to go any further. This was madness. Reckless. She had only wished for a kiss . . .

She sank her teeth into his lower lip then. "Don't stop," she whispered.

Brahm let out a slow, agonized breath. Her hips rocked against his hand as his fingers moved inside her. Every nerve in her body pleaded for something, some elusive release, and Holly whimpered in frustration.

"Does this please you?"

How could she answer him? She had no breath. The impassioned twirl of his tongue turned urgent, and his finger thrust in and out of her once more before, with one final flick over her little bud, he sent her over the edge in a blinding flash of pleasure.

She threw her head back and rode the wave of sensation, her body shaking with small spasms of ecstasy. A scream tore from her lips, muted by his ongoing kiss, as his finger teased every last tide from her.

She collapsed on the ground, her limbs numb.

A minute passed, then two, as she attempted to regain her breath and Brahm fought some battle for control, his jaw clenched and eyes shut tightly.

Holly savored this feel of him. For the rest of her life, she would remember this moment with him, would remember lying on an old ragged quilt as he introduced her to a pleasure she hadn't known; she would never forget the weight of him or his woody scent that disoriented her senses.

I'm well and truly in love.

She projected the thought to his heart, his soul. He had so

effortlessly captured hers. Now she understood, in all honesty, what love meant. There was no other man for her, nor would there ever be. She'd love Brahm Tremont until her last breath.

He pulled away, and the glance he gave her should have scorched her on the spot.

"Was that smashing enough for you?" he growled.

"I—" Why was he behaving this way?

"A word of advice, Miss Middleton," he said flatly. "If you ever come within touching distance of me again, I will drag you to the nearest bed, and I won't be responsible for what happens next."

Holly lay stunned as he lurched to his feet and stalked from the room, leaving her on the ground with her skirts hiked up.

Chapter 15

Holly woke in a soft, featherlike bed. The clock over the mantel told her it was early still, not even nine o'clock. With a long stretch, she took stock of all the sensations pulsing through her body. New energy appeared, a feeling that started from her chest and surged outward, thrumming from one nerve to the next, almost like a euphoric explosion.

Brahm's kiss had utterly scattered her wits. Her face still burned as she recalled the way she had shouted out in her pleasure. Unfortunately, along with that memory also came the one of his face, hard and furious, glaring down at her.

Brahm storming out of the room had undoubtedly put a damper on the event, but oddly, not so much on her mood. Holly suspected he had been merely overwhelmed by the unexpected and likely unwanted emotion of affection. She was far ahead of him in the attachment, after all.

She stared at the canopy of the bed, wondering how their intimacy of the previous day would change their interaction with one another on a larger scale.

She hadn't pressed him when he had left the room after their encounter. In fact, she had returned to her chamber and read the entire day before a low-lit fire. But even stowed away in her room, Holly knew he was there, his ever-present cologne reminding her how her body had responded to him.

The question, however, remained. Would he be more distant in the future or more attentive? And he had warned her away. But men were strange creatures.

And with Brahm being who he was—brooding by nature—it was hard to predict how he would react today, even though once she was

in front of him she could read his emotions readily enough.

She wondered if he would do well on his threat if she ventured within touching distance.

Better not test him yet, tempting though it may be.

Holly, satisfied that she'd awoken him to their potential, would give Brahm time to adjust to her in this new light. At the very least, she acknowledged, she had accomplished her task for him to see her as more than a charge.

In the meantime, while Brahm was off recovering his senses, Holly would ponder on what other pleasures lay between a lady and a man.

The thought made her feel peculiar. Down there.

Holly could still feel his breath on the arch of her neck after she'd exploded with pleasure, and by the saints, it had felt like heaven.

And then Brahm had warned her off.

She sighed. Holly would not be surprised if she had to dance naked in circles around him before he thoroughly seduced her—or allowed her to seduce him.

If they had more time, she'd happily find all the slow ways to convince him that they were meant to be. She'd delight in kissing him until he was just as lost as she was. Sadly, time was not on her side. She was still in hiding from the duke and society at large.

For a moment, fear gripped her. What if something hindered her time with Brahm? What if something threatened the fragile bond they'd formed and caused him to retreat behind his walls again?

She shook her head at herself and sat up. There was no point bemoaning over what she could not control. She had no choice but to trust fate. And Brahm.

Rising from the bed, Holly quickly dressed in a simple dress of soft green. She wanted to look pretty. At her best. And perhaps if his mood was so inclined, he could teach her a few card games.

With a table separating them.

She clucked her tongue. That was far from an intimate act, no? Nothing too scary there. Besides, Holly had always wished to learn a high-stakes game and believed he would be a smashing tutor.

Later they could read to each other before the hearth in the drawing room on separate chairs. Nothing suggestive. Nothing intimate.

When they weren't bickering, she was quite certain Brahm enjoyed her company. And he had yet to court any woman seriously. His foul temper probably kept ladies at bay.

Holly would not allow him to be so stubborn. To be honest, his infamous temper didn't faze her. She knew it was all bark and no bite. Sometimes it was even rather amusing, especially when it was a way of hiding the fact that he cared.

All but bouncing down the steps, Holly hummed a happy tune, in

search of her companion. The kitchen was remarkably quiet when she entered. She had expected to find Brahm there, brewing up another bitter pot of cocoa.

Knitting her brows together, she wandered to the drawing room, pausing inside the threshold. Her gaze darted to every corner of the room, searching. It was the same yet it was not. Bathed in bright light, the room looked a lot different than—

Daylight.

How had she not recognized the significance of it in the kitchen?

Pivoting on her heel, Holly dashed to the front entrance and flung the door open. Two fluffy white clouds drifted in the vast blue ocean of clear sky.

Holly pressed her hand to her throat.

The storm had passed.

Her brain accepted the truth beyond the shadow of a doubt. Her heart, on the other hand . . . Holly felt it crack open, pain pouring from the open wound, filling her bloodstream and spreading to every nerve in her body.

Brahm was gone.

A clearing of a throat drew Holly's attention to two women coming up the pathway.

A maid and a cook will arrive after the storm lets up. They will stay for your duration.

"Miss?" The younger of the two inquired.

"My companion . . ." she murmured, at a loss for words.

Visions flashed across her mind then. Images from the day Brahm found her in the church, and then of him in a rickety, old, uncomfortable chair. Of him in the bath, of him in her bed, of him lowering his mouth to hers.

Brahm had left her.

The women seemed to know whom Holly referred to, because the older one, the cook, Holly presumed, answered, "He arrived in the village just as we departed. Big fellow—said to look after you well."

Holly's stomach churned as the hairs on the nape of her neck prickled. "Did he say anything else?"

The cook shook her head. "Nay, but he headed out in the direction of London."

What did you expect? A whispering voice taunted her. *That he would fall in love with you because of a kiss?*

Yes, yes, she had. Because she certainly had.

Holly stood frozen as her gaze flicked over the green fields just beyond the women before she dashed in the direction of the stables. Fierce denial rose up inside her. He had not walked away from her, from them. There must be some other explanation.

She ran as fast as she was able, only to skid to a halt at the foot of the stable doors. Brahm's horse was gone.

Perhaps he had only gone for a ride?

Face the truth, Holly.

Still, she sprinted down the path toward the village in hopes of glimpsing him atop his horse in the distance. She ran and ran, because if she stopped, her legs would give way and her brain would be assaulted with the stark loneliness of her exile to come, of life without Brahm. No other adventure appealed to her anymore.

Holly raced down the path for what felt like hours, until her feet hurt and her legs could no longer bear the strain. When she had utterly exhausted her breath, she sagged to the ground, tears threatening to choke her.

She would not break down. Not for his cowardly hide.

How could he leave? Had their journey meant nothing to him?

Holly had felt strong with him by her side. Like she could conquer the world. Now, alone, the gravity of everything that had happened—of everything she had yet to face—hit her. Without Brahm grumbling beside her, making her smile and hope, she felt scared and small, as if her weight counted for nothing in the grand scheme of things.

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she hugged herself tightly. She gasped for breath. Her heart felt shattered, as though someone pounded against the organ with giant fists—it hurt so much.

Holly fell back to the ground, staring at the blurry clouds through tear-filled vision. Months of exile, without her family, loomed over her like a thundercloud. Without Brahm, Holly suddenly did not wish to remain here. He had brought joy to this place. To her. Without him, there was none.

But where would she go? Home? The Americas? Anywhere would be better than remaining in the cottage where she'd be haunted by memories of how close she had come to happiness.

Holly blinked a few times, ignoring the tightness in her chest that threatened to suffocate her. What on earth was she doing?

Middletons did not lie in a field and cry about their problems.

They faced them. Head on.

And she was certainly no coward. From the start, Brahm had distracted her. She'd been so drawn first to having a champion and then to him that not once had she given full thought to what quitting London and leaving her family meant—and neither had her sisters, who both had advised she lie low.

If the retribution of the duke hadn't towered over them all and if they had given a measure of thought to it, they would have concluded that avoiding the consequences did not mean they escaped them. That only delayed the inevitable.

There was nothing else for it. If Holly wished to be free, she must face the devil.

And, by Jove, she would!

She would return to London and meet the duke along with his outrageous demands. And she would make it clear, in no uncertain terms, that she would never marry his brother. And then . . . then she'd figure out what to do about her broken heart.

The thumping of hooves sent little shock waves up her spine, and Holly sat up, glancing wildly around. She blinked away the dewiness in her eyes.

"Brahm?" she called hopefully.

To her right, she noticed a rider, but before her hope managed to soar, more riders followed on his tail.

An uneasy feeling stirred inside her gut.

That wasn't Brahm.

Strangers were approaching her.

Fear slammed into her as she slowly rose to her feet. She could not outrun them, and there was nowhere to hide. They would be on her in a second.

Do not reveal any distress.

More easily said than done.

Three men brought their horses to a halt a few paces away from her, regarding her with avid interest.

"Can I help you, gentlemen?" Holly asked. Her voice was firm. That was good.

The leanest of the bunch snickered. "Hear that, Mike? She called ye a gentleman."

Mike, the biggest and ugliest of the lot, grunted. "She said us."

The lean fellow clapped him on the shoulder. "That is because ye're the only one of us too horrid ever to be considered anything but a brute."

Holly swallowed, disliking the two immediately. "If you are in search of the nearest village, it's about an hour's ride east," she murmured, pointing her finger in that direction.

"We are in search of a woman," murmured the third man and the finest looking of the bunch.

Holly's heart plunged to her feet.

"Is that her, John?" the mean, lean man asked the handsome one.

Sir Handsome studied her. Holly noted with some amount of relief that his eyes were kind. "The woman in the portrait has long hair," he said.

That caught her attention. Were these men in possession of a drawing of her? That rotten devil! She would wring the duke's neck if she ever got the chance.

"She chopped it off, then," Mr. Mean said.

"Finally, some luck," Mr. Ugly agreed.

"The color is also different," Sir Handsome murmured.

They all tilted their heads to study her.

Hah! Her transformation had worked! There might be hope for her yet. "Gentlemen, if I may be so bold as to ask, who are you looking for?"

"A duke's wife," Mr. Mean answered.

"Well, there you have it. I am no wife of a duke. Or a wife of anyone, for that matter," she muttered.

"The woman we are looking for is not the duchess," Sir Handsome clarified with just the barest hint of annoyance. "She is his brother's intended."

"Which one is it?" she snapped. "I am neither married nor betrothed."

The ugly one chuckled. "She's a wily one."

Mr. Mean fished for something in his pocket.

Holly stilled. What if they attempted to harm her? She was defenseless. But then he withdrew a small miniature. The portrait of her, she assumed.

Her hopes scattered.

"Looks like her, the face," Mr. Mean drawled.

"Yes," Mr. Ugly agreed. "The nose, brows, and cheekbones are the same."

"It could be a distant cousin of mine," Holly argued.

"No, this is you," the mean one said.

"I must warn you that I am not alone," she murmured, searching her brain for a way to get out of this. "My companion has gone into town to fetch our cook."

"Your companion, heh?" Sir Handsome mocked. "Nice try, missy. You are a slippery one, for sure, but any man would have to be mad to defy a duke."

Holly shrugged. "Except if the man who defies a duke is himself a duke." Or in her case, a marquis.

"Y're here with the duke?" Mr. Mean asked, confused.

Holly sighed.

"No, ye bloody idiot. She's trying to confuse us," Mr. Ugly said. "I think."

"And what if she didn't travel alone?"

"Then we shall inform His Grace that she had assistance," Sir Handsome said. "It would explain why we had such a difficult time in finding her." Displeasure darkened his features.

"How did you find me?" Holly asked, giving each of them a skeptical look. When they all narrowed their eyes at her, she quickly

amended, "If I am this person you are searching for."

Sir Handsome shifted on his horse. "We got lucky with a traveler claiming to have spotted you at an inn. He couldn't be sure it was you, and neither did he make mention of any companion you were traveling with."

"Damn lucky," Mr. Mean agreed. "We'd never have headed in this direction if we had not come across the man."

How damn unlucky for her.

"Now we get to collect the coin the duke promised. A hefty amount he placed on your safe, unharmed return," Sir Handsome said, soft reassurance in his voice.

So they meant no threat to her person. That was something, Holly supposed. But if anyone ever discovered she had not only traveled with the Marquis of Warton without a chaperone but with these ruffians as well, any salvageable thread of her reputation would be laid to rest.

These men were lucky, indeed.

The traveler must have glimpsed her when she had explored the first inn they had stopped at. And now that these men were here, Holly was presented with three possibilities: attempt to continue to persuade them that she was not who they wanted and return to her little cottage of exile; be the unwilling victim in their plot to return her to the duke; or return with them willingly.

The third option seemed the least likely to cause any trouble. And had she, not moments earlier, declared she would face the duke?

Admittedly, Holly had hoped to do so on her terms. Honestly, being bound and gagged did not send the message of a woman intent on fighting for her future. Why not try option one?

"Look, I'm sure this has all been a terrible mistake."

"No mistake, my lady," the handsome one said, and the others chuckled. "There is no need to be afraid of us."

Curse this day! She should have remained in bed, blissfully unaware of Brahm's abandonment and these men. Resisting them would only prolong the inevitable. Holly could see that now.

Fine. Option three it is.

Holly would willingly partake in their plan to return her. But first, she had a few demands of her own. "Very well, take me to the duke. But I will travel with you as your sister and on my own horse. We avoid bustling towns where I might be recognized—I still have a future to think of. And in return, I will give you no trouble. I shall be the model of a dutiful sibling."

They all looked at her, astonished.

Then Mr. Ugly and Mr. Mean swiveled their heads to Sir Handsome in unison. Clearly he was in command.

His eyes never left hers as he inclined his head. "Your wish is my command."

Holly nearly snorted. But having made her decision, however reluctantly, she would remain civil even if it killed her.

She spared a glance over her shoulder and out over the open fields, hoping that Brahm would materialize from behind the trees in the distance. Hoping that their kiss, their moment, had been more than just a fleeting desire to him.

Resignation settled deep in her heart.

No horse charged from the depth of the trees.

The Marquis of Warton was gone.

She'd have to save herself.

Chapter 16

One hour. That was how far he got. One bloody hour. Brahm had gotten as far as the outskirts of the village before he had stopped, sitting on the back of Galileo, and had cursed himself for leaving Holly to wake up alone. He hadn't even left a bloody note.

At the start of their journey, even as far back as discovering her in the secret passage of the church, Brahm hadn't expected much but troublesome, perhaps mildly embarrassing behavior from Holly Middleton.

And when he had agreed to aid her, he had just wanted some form of relief, some amusement to break the monotonous routine his life had become. With Josephine happily married and living with her husband, he had become more isolated than usual. He had believed, at the time, he could help a lady in need and get a little adventure in the undertaking.

But Holly Middleton was much more than he expected.

She was dazzling.

He had not expected her allure or his enduring desire for her. It was impossible to shake her. And then he had gone and ruined everything.

Brahm still felt a sting of shame for abandoning her there, on the ground, in a state of pleasure.

The bloody floor.

He was stark raving mad to have done that. And Holly had not sought him out for the rest of the day, which for her said quite a lot. No doubt she must have been furious with him. Not to mention what she must have felt when she found him gone.

Devil take it! Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined they'd be intimate. But she had taunted him, tempted him, robbed him of his breath and his self-control. He had been sorely unprepared for the

feelings she had provoked when she'd cried out in pleasure, her body coming undone in his arms. Something had shattered inside him.

And then he was the jackass who left after that.

Brahm fought to recollect the reasons he had steered clear of her before: she was prone to reckless behavior, outspoken, and brazen. And yet none of those reasons carried weight any longer.

Holly Middleton had revealed a side of herself that Brahm had not expected to find. She was radiant, kind, and accepting. The force of her was enticing. Her outspoken and brazen behavior was brave, refreshing, engaging.

Everything inside him responded to her.

And as he sat on the back of his horse, his eyes burning from lack of sleep, Brahm felt her everywhere. The taste of her was still fresh on his lips, the smell of her hair in his nose and the feel of her body tucked beneath his still prickling his skin.

Desperately, Brahm grasped for the strength to spur his horse onward and to place distance between them. He had done his duty. Nothing more was expected of him. So why was he not galloping off into the sunset without her? Because, try as he might, he could no longer recall why he wanted to leave Holly behind. He could not envision a life without her in it anymore.

How could he go back to his empty home? How could he continue to attend balls and soirees without her by his side, calming his temper and brightening situations that he otherwise abhorred? How could he go back to dining at a big table, alone, rather than picnicking in libraries with her?

Solitude was no longer enough.

He wanted Holly.

Who else would slip into his room when he bathed, spit out his hot chocolate when he forgot to add sugar, or inflame his skin with a mere touch? With her, he forgot about everyone and everything and simply lived in the present.

At that moment, sitting atop Galileo on the outskirts of the village, he finally ended the war within himself. With an extraordinary amount of emotion coursing through him, he charged off on his horse, turning back the way he had come.

The fact remained, too, that she should marry him. At least, that's what he planned on presenting to her.

He might not have compromised her in the actual sense of the word, but he had traveled with her unchaperoned. He had slept in the same room with her. He had kissed her. He had introduced her to pleasure. Those were grounds enough to demand that she marry him, to badger her into matrimony if she first declined him. Weren't they?

A humorless laugh escaped his throat.

He knew such methods would not work on Holly. No, she'd hear nothing of duty or ruination or good old-fashioned logic. She'd want the truth. She'd want to hear that he couldn't imagine living without her. She'd want to know that though her presence robbed him of any practical thought, her absence left him fumbling in the dark, choking on air.

But Brahm was not a man of many words. His snapping often got in the way whenever he felt raw emotion, and he felt a great measure of feeling now. He couldn't go to Holly like this. He was sure to fumble it.

So he changed direction once more and spurred his horse in the direction of the open fields.

An overwhelming sense of freedom settled in Brahm as he and Galileo explored the country lanes and bridle paths. After three-quarters of an hour, the raging emotions in his churning gut finally settled. That was the thing about riding—the proximity to the natural world always provided him with a clear head.

More level-headed than ever, he headed toward the cottage, prepared to present Holly with the facts: He cared for her. He desired her. He wanted to marry her. And she could not rip him to shreds by refusing him.

Simple.

To the point.

His confidence lasted all but an hour. Upon returning to the cottage, he found no sign of Holly. There was no answer when he called her name. He stood, befuddled, staring up the narrow flight of stairs, waiting for her to appear at the top.

"Holly?" he hollered again.

A figure did appear then, but she was all wrong.

"My Lord?"

"Where is Miss Middleton?" he snapped at the maid.

"I believe she's taking a stroll, my lord. She was quite distressed upon learning your lordship returned to London."

Brahm let out a foul curse.

He should never have left her.

"My Lord?"

He ignored the maid, his throat too tight to speak. What if she had attempted to follow him?

No, he shook his head, she wouldn't do that.

She wouldn't.

But still Brahm bolted out the door, his leather sole boots hitting the ground hard, each step pounding through the earth. Sweat rolled down his brow, and his heart hammered as he found no sign of her presence—or that she had ventured to pursue him.

See, there is nothing to worry over.

Brahm willed his beating heart to a slower pace. There was no need to panic. Not yet. She had, in all likelihood, gone for a walk to clear her mind.

Retrieving Galileo, he set out to inspect the grounds. He found no sign her.

Brahm scowled.

Where the hell was she?

Veering his horse to the main lane that led to the cottage, he decided to retrace his route and its small offshoots that led to a nearby river and fields. It was on the offshoot to the fields that he came across three pairs of hoof imprints.

An acidic taste formed in his mouth.

Riders had been here. And so had someone on foot.

Holly.

A growl lodged in the back of his throat; he was disgusted with himself for leaving Holly unprotected. Fear skittered over his skin as he dismounted to inspect the ground. The tracks could not be more than a few hours old.

Uncontrollable anger seized him. He wanted to kick something. Hard. He had turned his back for one moment, all because he couldn't see what had been right in front of him all along, and he had lost her.

Swamped with dread, he felt apprehension sweep over him. He stood gazing at the field, with no sense of direction. He felt as if someone had clobbered him over the head. Everything around him seemed to lose sound. Everything but his pulse, which pounded in his ears.

Focus.

He had to figure out what had happened.

His breathing labored, he pulled at his disheveled hair in frustration, examining the area she had been taken from.

The tracks were faint, but they did not indicate that anyone had run in the direction of the cottage—only away from it—and neither did they indicate any sign of a struggle. They moved in the direction of the village in a rather organized manner.

That made no sense.

Had Holly gone willingly? Why would she?

Unless . . . Unless these riders were the duke's men. Unless she'd given herself up to a fate she hadn't thought she had an alternative to or true escape from.

Devil take it!

His heart worked hard as he breathed unevenly.

He was the alternative, and she didn't even know it.

Holly opened her eyes and was greeted by the canopy of an unfamiliar bed. And even if she had not noticed something as trifling as the strange canopy, the gloriously soft mattress and plush bedding would have alerted her all the same.

Her brain felt thick, and there was a dull throbbing at the front of her skull. Her hand lifted to her temple where a bruised lump had swelled to the size of a chicken egg.

Reckless—she had been too reckless.

Why had she gone and convinced herself halfway through the journey that she really ought to escape—not to run, but to get away to meet the duke on her own terms, as she first desired?

Gah, it had seemed like a smashing idea at the time.

She had run off, without a plan, at a moment when she'd thought her captors had their guard down, but they hadn't. When she had forced her horse to bolt, Sir Handsome had chased her and grabbed the reins, and the momentum of the sudden stop had thrown her from the mount.

Holly was lucky to still be alive.

"Good, you are awake."

She winced as those hard, steely words slammed against her skull like a hammer.

St. Ives.

Of course, he was here just as her head was splitting. But wait, where exactly was *here*? It must be one of his residences. But which?

Holly opened one eye, angling her face to the side, trying not to jar her head too much. The duke's face was a blurry blotch in her vision.

She blinked, and his features slowly came into focus. Black eyes rested on her. They didn't glare, just coolly stared. After all, to glare would mean the lofty duke felt something other than indifference. Which begged the question, what did he feel? Slighted? That was an emotion, right? Or was the duke going through the motions of emotion to keep up appearances with his beloved inferior peers?

"You found me," she rasped, her voice still thick with sleep. "You must be in raptures."

"Did you honestly believe I would not?"

Yes, she'd honestly believed he wouldn't have. Had his men not struck such luck, and had Holly not run after Brahm, and had Brahm not left in the first place, it was unlikely the duke would ever have discovered her.

"Did you truly believe jilting me would not carry any consequence?" he continued.

"Yes, yes, you are a mighty duke and shall deliver my

comeuppance. Spare me the woeful tale of how my betrayal forever broke your heart. You married my sister. That is a far cry from being jilted. In fact, if I am to believe the *London Times*, you always meant to marry Willow, not me.”

Yes, she had known there would be some consequence. What she hadn’t known was that she would fall in love again. She wondered what the duke would say about that.

He clenched his jaw. “A necessary tale to spare both our houses the humiliation of your actions.”

“It seems like everything worked out for you, Your Grace,” she paused, her voice dry and cracked. “So why must you still do this?”

His expression did not change at her words; not one line of his face moved until he spoke. “You embarrassed my family. You gave your word and then you broke it.”

“And what of you?” Holly challenged. “You hid your true feelings, masked your true intentions. What is that not if not breaking one’s word? And now I must be the one punished? You have no right to me, Your Grace. I am not yours.”

“You made sure of that, did you not, Miss Middleton? But there are other ways to mete out lessons.”

“A lesson is one thing; marriage to your brother is lifelong,” Holly snapped and then flinched. Mercy, her head hurt.

“So that is why you ran away instead of facing the aftermath of your actions, the threat of another looming marriage.”

“And what does Lord Jonathan have to say about this plan of yours? What has he done to warrant the same punishment as me?”

He waved her comment aside. “It’s past time he marries.”

“So you will happily doom us both to a life of unhappiness?”

His eyes narrowed. How had she ever found those deep pools of black intoxicating?

“You betrayed me.”

“Your brother did not,” she shot back.

Something flickered in his face but was gone in an instant.

“How can you believe what you did was right?” Holly demanded. “That it was acceptable to deceive me and fool me into believing you are something you are clearly not?”

“We all put our best self forward when making new acquaintances, Miss Middleton.”

“That was your best self?”

“I was being charming.”

“Up till the moment you handed me a set of rules to live by. You really ought to have waited until after the wedding.”

His gaze roved her face. “Agreed.”

Holly bristled. “I am a person, you know. Not a slave. I do not need

my meals assigned to me. Your deception went too far. Your rules go too far.”

He considered her, his face impassive. No surprise there, Holly thought darkly. The man was as obstinate as a bull.

“The rules are there for a reason,” he ground out.

“Reasons that apparently do not require any explanation. How is my dear sister faring with those rules?”

For the first time, he looked something other than aloof.

He looked sour.

Holly smothered a grin. A surge of pride swelled in her heart. Willow had not allowed this man’s mad ways to govern her.

“Your sister is . . .”

Holly raised a brow.

“A challenge,” he muttered.

He seemed so put out that her lips did twitch. “Have you ever considered that your rules suppress the very essence of our nature?”

“Because it is not in your nature to follow rules?” he mocked.

“It’s not our way to blindly follow,” Holly corrected. “If I were you, Your Grace, I’d focus on what does lie in our nature rather than on what doesn’t. Your life would be easier.”

“Wise advice, but it changes nothing. You will marry Jonathan.”

Holly’s heart dropped to her shoes. “Are you in possession of a heart? Do you feel anything resembling emotion, or is this all just a pretense?” She rose to recline against the pillows.

Black eyes narrowed, their depths as cool as before. “Oh, I feel. I feel too damn much. And it changes nothing. You will marry my brother within the coming fortnight and become part of the family you so wished to escape from.”

“I am already part of your family! Is that not enough?”

“My decision has been made.”

Holly almost choked on her anger. “You tricked me,” she exclaimed. “You used my romantic ideals against me from the beginning! You sought to take advantage of my nature, which ought to be punishment enough.”

She needed something from him, even if just an admission.

He studied her, seemingly debating what an admission of truth would reveal about himself. Holly could not be sure, however. Not a muscle twitched on his features. It was as if the man were made of granite and had no capacity to bend.

Finally, he said, “It was imperative that I marry posthaste, and you were in desperate need of falling in love.”

“Not that desperate,” Holly snapped, but inside she felt a sense of satisfaction. She’d already known this; she simply needed him to say it.

He gave a curt nod. "I miscalculated."

"You thought me too weak to oppose you," she murmured, this time more to herself.

"Not weak, Miss Middleton," he denied. "Only smart."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Where is my sister? I wish to see her."

"You will not see her or any of your family before the wedding."

Holly had expected that response. It still annoyed her. "Too afraid we will outsmart you once again?"

"Precautionary measures."

"But of course," she replied mockingly.

St. Ives leaned forward in his chair, his elbows lowering to rest on his legs. "As you said, Miss Middleton, I should focus on what lies in your nature. You can't help but stir trouble."

Blast. She had said that.

"Does Willow know you are keeping me against my will?"

He settled back again. "My wife knows what I see fit to tell her."

Meaning no, Willow did not.

They studied each other. His gaze traveled over her bruise before meeting her eyes again. "Have you been compromised?"

Holly raised a brow at his unexpected question. Inside, her heart danced against her chest.

Of course, she knew what he meant, but in how broad a sense did he mean? And which answer would help or hinder her? If yes, she might not need to marry his brother, but he'd likely print the fact in the papers just to thoroughly ensure her ruin. But then she recalled one of the men, Mr. Mean, had intended to inform the duke that she had traveled with an escort. Would that in itself ruin her in any way? She'd never admit it was Brahm. She'd protect him from this at all costs.

"You sent three monkeys after me," she responded vaguely, buying time.

"A simple yes or no would suffice."

In that case . . .

"Yes," she snapped.

An all too knowing smile stretched across his lips. "I see your spirit hasn't been broken by your little adventure. I am, however, disinclined to believe you."

"Then why did you ask?"

"The men that brought you back," his eyes took on a dangerous glint as he glanced at her wound, "told me of your little attempt to escape and that you were thrown from your horse in the effort."

"I've had rotten luck lately."

"So they spoke the truth, then?"

“Yes, though you believe nothing I say in any case.”

The duke ignored her comment. “They also told me you were aided by a gentleman.”

“A tale I told in an attempt to foil them.”

The duke raised a haughty brow. “You are a terrible liar, Miss Middleton. Your eyes are much too expressive. If there was indeed a man who aided you, I will discover his identity and bring him to task.”

Holly scoffed. “You are under the mistaken impression that every man quakes in his boots at the prospect of defying you.”

“Some men are brave,” he agreed.

Holly searched his face, now nothing but pity in her heart for him. What had happened to make him such a stick in the mud, so controlling over everyone in his life? “Some men, Your Grace, are more formidable than you give them credit for. And some are far more dangerous than even yourself.”

“A man is only as formidable as the friends that stand at his back, Miss Middleton.”

“And how many people stand at yours, Your Grace?” she challenged.

“Friends come in all forms, Miss Middleton.” He stood. “If you will excuse me, I have preparations to see to.”

“What of my father? You cannot marry me against my will!”

“Your father has given his permission to the union.”

“That is a lie! He would never do that!”

St. Ives lifted a mocking brow and strode from the room.

Holly watched him go, the slam of the door signaling more than just the end of all her dreams.

Anger burned inside her like a hot torch. But her anger wasn’t just at the duke, it was also at herself and Brahm, her elusive Marquis of Warton. Honestly, she was angry at the entire situation. Simply furious that her chance at true happiness was going to be taken away from her after she’d finally found it. Because it appeared she was going to get married after all, but it was going to be against her will, and it was going to be to the wrong man.

Chapter 17

Dark fury simmered beneath a cool exterior as Brahm dismounted before the residence of the Duke of St. Ives. It had taken him two bloody days to get back. Two days of attempting to overtake the bastards who had kidnapped Holly. Two days of fear riding him harder than he rode his horse. Two days of cursing himself ten times the fool.

Upon the revelation that she had been taken—and by who—he had immediately ridden back to London at breakneck speed, stopping only to change his horse.

Since their group included three riders and Holly, he had hoped to overtake them at some point or even hear a damn rumor. But nothing. Not one word was uttered at the towns where he had stopped. They had seemed to vanish, however impossible that was. And to search the less-traveled roads would put him too far behind them.

So he had prayed for no harm to befall her and rode back to London with the sole purpose of reaching the city before the duke could marry Holly to his brother.

The first place he had visited upon on his return was a contact of his—a Bow Street Runner, Marcus Hunt. Their meeting had only served to further agitate his temper, since according to Hunt, there was absolutely nothing to be done. She was the sister-in-law of a duke, and if Charles Middleton, Holly's father, had given consent to the match, it was over. As far as her consent went, it did not count.

Brahm had already known these facts. He had just wanted to know whether there was some way he could get her back without breaking any laws.

Hunt had assured him that there wasn't. Entering the duke's premises and rescuing her would be trespassing and kidnapping. The

only way he could get her back was if she escaped and they eloped, thereby making her his property.

Her father may still press charges, but if they consummated the marriage, there wasn't much to be done.

Brahm doubted Charles Middleton would do such a thing, and he also suspected the man had not given his permission to the duke. The older man appeared gentle and pliant, but Brahm knew he loved his daughters above all else and should not be underestimated.

Hunt had urged him to appeal to the duke first, before doing something that might get him into trouble. The Runner had also said that should it come down to getting into trouble, he would have Brahm's back.

Good man, that Hunt.

After he left the offices of Bow Street, Brahm had gone to the archbishop to procure a special license. He did not entertain the idea of racing to Gretna Green with the duke hot on his heels. A quick ceremony, if Holly would have him, somewhere in London would suffice. Somewhere in a garden, perhaps.

The archbishop, however, had been reluctant to grant him his wish. It appeared he was loath to cross St. Ives. That hadn't deterred Brahm. He wouldn't leave without that document. And he hadn't.

Even with the license securely in his pocket, his temper still rode high. He was itching for a fight. And perhaps that was why he found himself banging on the door of St. Ives's residence at three o'clock in the morning—not quite the wisest course of action.

If he was honest, Brahm had half-expected the duke's residence to be transformed into a fortress of patrolling servants and big snarling dogs. Instead, all was silent, calm. Well, except for him.

He was on the verge of declaring war.

All because of Holly Middleton, who had crawled into the empty spaces of his heart and firmly nestled herself there.

So the bloody Duke of St. Ives could not have her now.

Not once did he pause his pounding on the door, and it was finally thrown open by a spindly old man, his pinched lips making it clear that he was not happy at being dragged from his bed.

"I demand to see St. Ives," Brahm boomed, his voice echoing through the halls even though he still stood outside.

"The duke is not receiving at this hour," the butler paused, quickly giving him a once-over, and added, "my lord."

The last he said with such disdain that Brahm's fury quadrupled. He looked like shit, yes, and he had to give the butler credit for still recognizing that he was a peer, but the man was as stiff and intolerant as his master.

He pushed the wiry servant aside, shoving him against the wall

before stalking through the door.

“St. Ives!” he thundered. “Get your rotten ass down here, or I’ll tear the place apart.”

It did not take long for the thumping of hurried footsteps to echo through the halls of the mansion.

“St. Ives!” he roared again. Just for good measure.

The stomping footfalls fell silent just as a voice growled from the stairwell, “What the hell is the meaning of this?”

Brahm turned toward the voice to see the duke descending the stairs, clad in nothing but a pair of breeches. For a moment he was distracted by the duke’s beard. And his disheveled hair. It seemed too out of place from what he had expected: a stoic, controlled, impeccably groomed tyrant. This duke looked like a ruffian that belonged on the back of a horse chasing down gold in the Wild West.

Then, above him, a smaller figure came into view—the duchess, Willow Middleton, covered from top to bottom in the unsightliest night shift Brahm had ever laid eyes on.

Her eyes widened at the sight of him, her face losing all color.

Brahm turned his full glower to the duke. “Where the hell is she?”

The duke’s shoulders stiffened. Willow gasped.

If the chit had any hope of denying she had not known of her sister’s departure with Brahm, she had just dashed it.

St. Ives, on the other hand, did not acknowledge his wife but remained rigid, his eyes fixed solely on Brahm. No surprise flickered in his gaze at the announcement that Brahm had aided Holly. Either the man was good at hiding his emotions, or he had already known.

“So you are the one who aided my wayward sister-in-law with her escape.”

Brahm bristled. “And you are the controlling bastard who won’t afford his wife the pleasure of an extra piece of toast.”

As the duke’s expression suddenly transitioned from stony to molten, Brahm continued, unfazed, “Not to mention an inglorious cur that sent three mercenary riders to snatch up a lady.”

At this, the duchess gasped again, but now righteous fury entered her gaze.

“Perhaps we can take this to my study,” St. Ives spit out.

“To hell with your study. I want to know where the hell you are keeping Holly!”

St. Ives crossed his hands over his chest. “And what business do you have with her?”

A loaded question and one Brahm ignored—for now. He did not wish to urge the duke into action, trying to marry Holly off to his brother any sooner than he already planned.

Brahm took a menacing step forward. “I know you took her against

her will," he barked out, his chest heaving, "which is kidnapping and against the bloody law."

"I did no—"

Willow's quiet voice interrupted the duke's retort. "You found my sister and you did not think to inform me?"

The duke blanched at the soft question.

"That is of no concern—"

"Of mine?" Willow finished. "Holly is my sister. Am I to understand, then, that your brother is no concern of yours?"

St. Ives turned to his wife, shoulders bunched. "That is not what I said."

"As of yet, my father has not permitted the union. So you have no right to take her without her consent."

"Your father agreed to consider my terms—one of which is that she may remain on my property until he has done so. The matter is all but done."

"He only agreed to your insanely idiotic terms because you threatened him, and I am here to keep an eye on her. So where is my sister?" the duchess snapped.

"She is not here."

"You said—"

"I said on my property, not necessarily this property."

"You manipulative bastard."

Brahm whistled.

The duke shot him a scathing glare before turning back to his wife.

Being in the company of a Middleton the past few days, Brahm recognized her tone of voice. The words were whispered in such a soft manner that he had almost frozen right along with the duke.

This did not bode well for St. Ives.

Brahm watched as the man clenched his fists, and his stony mask fell back into place.

"This is not the time, Willow."

"I beg to differ," Willow said, descending two more steps and coming to eye level with her husband. "This is the perfect time. You are keeping my sister from me, and that I will never forgive. I may share a house with you, attend balls at your side, dine at the same table, but this is no longer my home, and you are no longer welcome in my life beyond that."

Brahm winced.

"You are my wife," the duke growled.

"She is my sister," she countered.

They stared at each other for an endless moment. Even Brahm shifted on his feet before the duke finally drawled, "It seems my wife has gone rogue."

"This is preposterous, Ambrose. You cannot keep my sister prisoner, and you certainly cannot force her to marry your brother! Where is she?"

"On the contrary, my dear wife. I intend to do exactly that."

"What of your brother? Does he not have a say in the matter?"

"Everyone seems overly concerned with my brother."

Willow shook her head, at a clear loss for words. "There is no reasoning with you—not when you are this stubborn, this uncaring of who you hurt."

"Quite right, my dear."

"Then know this," the duchess said, her tone suddenly both haughty and chilly. "If you do not stop with this revenge plot of yours, you will never be welcome in my chambers again."

Emotion flashed across St. Ives's face.

Brahm watched the exchange with avid interest. He felt almost sorry for the bastard.

Then Brahm recalled the reason he was there.

"St. Ives, as much as I am loath to interrupt your marital setback, I must warn you: if you harm one hair on Holly's head, I will disembowel you. As for your brother, I will disembowel him, too, if he agrees to your cockamammy scheme and marries her. In fact, I might eviscerate you both just for the sheer pleasure of it."

"What is my sister-in-law to you?" St. Ives growled. "She has been nothing but a thorn in my side."

The muscles in his back straightened. Damn if he was about to admit to the bastard that he was in love with her. It would bring the man all the more pleasure in keeping Holly from him.

"I gave her my word," he barked out instead.

"Your word," St. Ives echoed, disbelief ringing in his voice. "And you will incur my wrath over the word you gave a woman who left me, a duke, at his wedding?"

Willow snorted.

Brahm struggled to maintain his composure. A throbbing pressure mounted in his skull. Incur *his* wrath? He had come here, at this hour, so the duke would understand whose wrath had been incurred. Just who in the blazes did this sap think he was? The bloody king of France?

"I am no more afraid of you than I am of a rat," Brahm growled. "To me, her importance has never been in doubt. And let us not forget, you asked her to marry you under false pretenses."

"A mistake."

"You've made many of those, I see." Brahm's gaze flicked to Willow, and the duke stiffened. "Hand her over, St. Ives. I will not ask again. I don't give a damn about you or your supposed wrath. It is paltry

against what you will experience if you incur mine.”

“I am the Duke of St. Ives, Warton. Do not forget it.”

Brahm scoffed. “A duke. A bastard. It’s all the same to me. You speak as though you are untouchable, but are you? A man whose pride is so easily wounded that he keeps young women locked away as retribution? I tell you this: you might have Miss Middleton now, and you might even believe that you will marry her off to your brother, but that marriage will happen over my rotting carcass. You take my word for it.”

“She embarrassed my family name,” the duke bit out.

“I don’t give a damn. You already have one Middleton to make miserable for the rest of her life. I’ll be damned if you take another.”

With those parting words, Brahm pivoted on his heel and marched from the residence, shooting the butler a frosty glare as he passed.

“I am not an enemy you want, Warton.”

The duke’s ominous words reached him just as he crossed over the threshold. He didn’t even pause his stride.

“Neither am I, St. Ives,” Brahm shot over his shoulder.

The duke would soon discover just how true that was.

Chapter 18

The next evening

When it came to the people he loved being threatened, Brahm had never harbored any delusions about his reaction: he transformed into a beast. He would rant and rave, bellow and boom, and move mountains to shelter and protect them. Unchartered waters did not faze him; he would charge into hell itself. And in the case of Lord and Lady Eldridge's ball, he'd even enter the heart of the ton to secure the safety of his family.

And Holly Middleton was his family.

Not the damn duke's or his weasel brother.

His.

Brahm thundered through the ballroom with long strides, his narrowed eyes searching for their prey. Fury churned in his gut. And fear. Fear that he may be too late, that Holly was already married and well outside his reach. It did not help matters that not even Hunt and the Bow Street Runners had been able to track down her whereabouts.

The duke may be a bastard, but he was a clever one.

He spotted Poppy Middleton in the crowd, her face losing color at the sight of him. This he took as a sign that she also did not know her sister had been commandeered by her brother-in-law. That made Brahm even angrier, for it meant Holly was well and truly alone.

Poppy Middleton murmured something in her cousin's ear, and the next thing Brahm knew, Bradford Middleton, the Earl of Dashwood, was shouldering his way over to him.

Just what he bloody needed—interference from the Earl of Charming.

The man was in his cups if he believed he could dissuade Brahm

from confronting St. Ives again. He was dead set on his pursuit to get Holly back. They had not parted on the best of terms. He bloody well needed to give her an apology and make it right.

And Brahm wanted her to have her dream wedding. He wanted her to find the love she so richly deserved, even if it meant getting married in a peacock outfit. But what he truly wanted was for her to direct all that love at him. Because never in his entire thirty-two years of existence had he felt anything as he had in the moment she had come undone in his arms.

He hungered for her, all the time. He wanted her in his bed, in his arms. He wanted to be the only man to ever place such a look of complete rapture on her face. He wanted her small, innocent touches. He wanted to hear her laughter every day.

He just wanted . . . her.

And damn if he'd let anyone stop him.

But Holly was still tucked away, unreachable, and the duke had yet to admit defeat. And that was why Brahm would leave nothing to chance. He thought she could forgive him for leaving her; he only hoped she'd forgive him for what he was about to do.

Another of the Middleton brood, Lord Quinn, appeared before him, grabbing him by the shoulders and halting his movements.

Brahm's face darkened. "Get out of my bloody way, pup, or you will hit the ground."

"I'm not a pup, you sour cur," Quinn growled. "And you will hit the floor before you can pull a punch."

Brahm growled low in his throat.

"No need for violence, brother," Dashwood murmured as he finally came up beside them. "Whatever you are thinking of doing, Warton, don't."

Brahm glared at them. "And what do you know of what I may or may not do, Charming?" he snapped.

The man only cocked an arrogant brow.

Quinn, the younger of the two, lowered his voice and said, "Poppy has informed us that you aided Holly, and yet you are here. What have you done with our cousin?"

Brahm swore, his impatience swelling with each passing second. He did not have time for this.

"What did I do with your cousin? Best direct that question to St. Ives, since the moment I turned my back, his thugs snatched her."

Both men's eyes darkened at the news.

"Why did you turn your back in the first place?" Quinn challenged.

"To take a piss," Brahm snapped, his temper erupting. "Or would you have me dangling my cock before your dear cousin while unchaperoned?"

Dashwood cursed.

Quinn's grip tightened on his shoulders. "How dare you—"

"Quinn," Dashwood interrupted with a firm voice. "Let it go."

Brahm smirked. He knew he was being a beast, but damn it all to hell, who the deuce was this pup to accuse him of anything? Even if he was right. Losing Holly was his fault, but Quinn didn't need to know that.

"Where is Holly now?" Dashwood asked.

Brahm turned his hard gaze to the man. "She is not at his residence. I have a man searching the entire city, but there is no trace of her."

Both men uttered oaths.

"We have been searching for her since the wedding," Dashwood said. "And now that she is back, we will find her. To make a scene now, Warton, would only complicate matters."

Lips curling into a grimace, Brahm knocked Quinn's arms away. He wanted his home to be the place Holly laid her head to rest at night, except she was being held prisoner by a stubborn duke who wanted to marry her off to someone else. So, yes, things were already bloody complicated.

His scowl deepened. "Get out of my way."

"I don't think you are being practical here," Quinn argued.

"I agree," Brahm said. "But then again, being practical has not helped to locate her. Now, acting bizarrely and out of character . . . that may stir up the hornets' nest just enough to find her."

"She is my family, Warton, thus my responsibility," Dashwood echoed in voice that warned not to defy him.

Brahm scoffed. "It's hard to take you seriously, Dashwood, with your purple jacket blinding my eyes."

Quinn gripped his brother's shoulder. "Do not take the bait."

Brahm's laugh was a low, ominous sound that had the brothers shooting glances at each other.

"Is he laughing at us?" Quinn asked Dashwood.

Brahm's lips curled up in a snarl, impatient to get away from them. Since St. Ives had yet to announce the engagement between his brother and Miss Middleton, he was about to do some announcing of his own.

"I do not take well to being laughed at, Warton."

"Then maybe," Brahm drawled in a lazy voice, "You should not have worn a purple jacket. I myself prefer a more manly shade."

Quinn glanced at the jacket with a frown.

Dashwood raked his hair in frustration. "What are you implying, Warton?"

Brahm smiled. Crookedly. "Perhaps a shade of royal blue would be better suited?"

Dashwood growled low in his throat.

"That is enough," Quinn snapped. "What is it you are trying to accomplish here?"

"I will lay dead in my grave before I let St. Ives marry your cousin to his brother."

"That's a passionate statement," Dashwood observed.

"I'm passionate about your cousin."

Brahm shoved away from them without waiting for a reaction. This time they let him go. They did, however, much to his annoyance, trail after him at a discreet distance.

No matter. He pushed them from his mind and focused on the reason he had come to this godforsaken ball—the final stand. His eyes roamed the throng of peers, eager to be done with the night. It didn't take long to spot St. Ives, who was in deep conversation with his wife. After all, he had only to search for the most arrogant bastard in the room. And at the couple's side stood Lord Jonathan.

He reached the trio just as the duke's eyes leveled with his. In the way of height, there wasn't much difference between them, but the duke was leaner where Brahm was much bulkier.

Brahm smiled. It was just the slight stretch of his lip but enough of an indication that the evening was about to get interesting.

The man's posture stiffened.

"Just the dog I've come to see," Brahm snarled before he even came to a halt.

A hush fell over most of the room as his voice traveled to bystanders. From the corner of his eye, he spotted Josephine in the crowd, her eyes wide with disbelief and her hand covering her mouth in shock.

"Warton," St. Ives warned, casting a quick glance to their audience, "not here." He bit out the sentence, each word clipped and unmistakable to their spectators.

Brahm didn't mind. It implied a previous skirmish.

Good. That'll start the talk.

"Settle down, St. Ives. I was talking to your brother."

Lord Jonathan arched a brow. "I am not aware of any business between you and me, but I stand with my brother, Warton. Let's take this to a more private setting?"

"No? And where would you prefer we go to hash this out? Perhaps you can take me to my betrothed? Or do you not want the good people of London to know you are keeping us apart just because she fell in love with me and not you?"

Brahm cringed at Josephine's soft gasp. She had joined him at his side, and he hadn't noticed. He spared her a brief glance. It was a big disclosure if Josephine was scandalized.

And that was what he had intended. It was a wild, speculative, extremely risky declaration, but it was one Brahm refused to take back.

“Warton,” the duke warned, his voice soft and menacing.

“You are not hard of hearing, are you, St. Ives? This is between me and your brother.”

Brahm glared at the man. He still had a hard time fathoming how Holly had fancied herself in love with the stiff jackanapes. The bastard should be grateful. It was only out of respect for Holly and her family that he directed this confrontation to Lord Jonathan so as not to unravel all the efforts Dashwood and the duke had made to keep gossip at bay.

“Be that as it may, I’m still the head of my family.”

“Perhaps it’s time to let your brother fight his own battles, or does your need for control extend to him as well?” Brahm taunted, directing his glower to Lord Jonathan. “Where is Holly Middleton, my betrothed?”

Gasps sounded all around them. Whether it was because of his insult or the announcement of who, precisely, was his intended, it had the same effect: the duke’s face turned red.

“Warton, this is outrageous. If you—”

“No, Lord Jonathan,” Brahm interrupted in a low, dark voice laced with steel. “If you so much as bring a priest within ten feet of her, I will geld you and mount your skin to a wall.”

The words hung in the air as all around them whispers of scandalized matrons flared throughout the ballroom.

“How utterly rude,” a woman from the group nearest to them exclaimed.

“Lord Jonathan kidnapped the marquis’s fiancée? Scandalous!” another one said.

“How romantic!”

Brahm scowled.

Behind St. Ives, Willow offered Brahm a small smile of gratitude.

Lord Jonathan stepped forward until he was face-to-face with Warton. “I don’t respond to threats.”

“That’s splendid, because it’s not a threat, it’s a promise.”

“Any more promises, Warton?”

Brahm’s hands clenched and unclenched at his side. “Not at present, but I am sure I can drum some up if you do not give me my betrothed back.”

“Brahm,” Josephine laid a soft hand on his arm.

Brahm and Lord Jonathan stared at each other, eye to eye, shoulder to shoulder. All around them the tension soared. No one breathed a word.

Finally, Lord Jonathan muttered only four words, "This is not over," and stalked off.

Brahm watched him go, controlling every impulse in his body not to take after the wretch. He had done enough for now. A threat made this publicly would need to be dealt with.

"You have made an enemy today," St. Ives said, his voice a low growl of promise.

"You mean nothing to me," Brahm snapped. The only thing that mattered was that he get back Holly.

They glared at each other, both stubborn and set in their ways. Brahm had not given St. Ives any other choice but to release Holly. But now Holly had to marry Brahm or else commit true social suicide.

He hoped that she'd forgive him in time. Until then, he would do his damndest to make her happy.

Chapter 19

Three days, two hours, and approximately eleven minutes—that was how long Holly had been imprisoned in this room. Or at least she thought it was. It was hard to say. Her eyes had hardly left the clock since she had awoken to find St. Ives at her bedside, but she didn't know how long she had been asleep after they first brought her to the room.

She sat on the floor before the bed, staring at the luxury around her in mild contemplation. After the duke had left, not one other person had entered the room except for the footman who brought her food. Whenever he left, he locked her in. She supposed the next time she'd see anyone else would be at her unwanted wedding.

St. Ives must not have told anyone that he had found her; he practically admitted he had no intention of telling Willow. If he had, she knew her sisters would have found a way to free her. And being a captive for three days, Holly had ample amount of time to consider her fate. It had become startlingly clear that there would be no escaping it.

She had tried, of course. To escape, that is.

She had tried her damndest.

But the duke had thought of everything. She shot a glare at the window, which had been bolted shut. From the outside. She had even considered smashing the glass, but what use would it be, since there were nails mounted into the wall on the outside.

Damn you, St. Ives.

Her eyes flicked to the door, her lips pulling up in annoyance. She had tried to pick the lock, too. But her hairpins hadn't done the trick, and there was nothing strong enough in the room to pick the sturdy lock.

There was nothing to signal for help, either. The windows faced a private garden and no other houses.

At one point, she did contemplate knocking out the footman with a food tray and making a dash for it, but she simply wasn't a violent person, and given their size difference, she doubted it would work.

If a maid had visited, she could have pleaded her case and begged her to send a note of her whereabouts to her sisters. But only the footman came into her room, as sour as the duke himself.

She had even stood by the door screaming for hours on end for the staff to let her out.

She eyed the golden tray with ambivalence.

She had reached the moment of truth: she would launch a stealthy attack on a footman and make her grand escape or soon be the wife of Lord Jonathan Griffin. Not a bad match, if only her heart did not hurt so much over it.

She reached for the tray.

Holly missed Brahm. Missed his thunderous expressions, his dark scowls, and the way his lips twitched whenever she amused him. But, above all, she missed the strong circle of his arms.

Her fingers traced over the patterns etched into the plate.

Hope was a damnable thing.

When all else failed, it allowed her to fantasize of being rescued by Brahm. But then she would remember he had left her, and those fantasies would turn to dust. An hour later, she would entertain them again, but this time her sisters would be the administrators of her rescue, and Brahm would ride in on his knightly steed and whisk her away just as the duke caught up to them again.

Holly was and would always be a romantic at heart—she loved a good, happy ending.

It wasn't over yet.

Not while she had this tray. She clutched it tightly against her chest.

However, the truth remained that Holly was the sole administrator of her escape. Brahm believed she was firmly nestled at the cottage, and by the time her family discovered her presence here, she might already be wedded—and bedded—if her bolt for freedom failed.

Holly's head fell back against the bed.

The thought of rolling around in the sheets with Lord Jonathan left her feeling cold and numb. The only man she wanted to be seduced by had run away from the seduction.

She sighed. Holly had wanted to believe him different from all the others. It had certainly felt different than all the others. She'd truly believed she stood a chance with Brahm. That it had been true love.

She had been wrong. Again.

Holly wondered how her sister fared as the overbearing duke's

duchess. Here, locked away in this stellar room, she had caught a glimpse of the life she had escaped but doomed her sister to. At least St. Ives had seemed flustered by Willow's presence in his life.

This routine would kill her yet. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner were delivered to her room at exactly ten o'clock, two o'clock, and eight o'clock, respectively. Not a minute earlier or a minute later.

Every day it remained the same. Her surroundings may be elegant and lovely, but inside, Holly felt as hollow as the small vase stationed expertly on the—empty—writing table.

She had begun to wonder what would happen if the footman brought her food two minutes early. Would he wait outside her door until those excess minutes passed? Which begged the next question: Was the entire staff in possession of pocket watches?

Honestly, she could just imagine the servants regularly checking their pocket watch to ensure their timing was always impeccable. And what if their timing was a bit off? Would their faces then distort in justifiable horror? Or would their hearts slam against their chests as their footsteps either slowed or quickened?

It must have driven the duke near mental to discover he had not wedded the Middleton he'd chosen. It appeared he valued control above all things. The man was mad, completely insane. And if nothing else, her initial acquiescence to his proposal certainly revealed her utter lack of skill when it came to spotting dubious predators.

Desperate to fall in love, the duke had said.

He was right, to some degree.

Holly was desperate—but not to fall in love, just to find the man her heart longed for. And as the days passed and she was left to her own devices in the confines of these four walls, she often wondered what Brahm was doing at that precise moment.

Like now, when she was seated on the ground, captured, was he perhaps sleeping in? Or was he seated behind his desk in his study, attending estate matters, a scowl darkening his brow? Did he spare her any thought?

Holly had been so confident he was The One.

There had been a connection between them, she was sure of it. There had been a spark of passion, too, which she had thought could lead to more—to love.

If only the storm hadn't let up so soon. Perhaps then . . . But such ruminations were neither here nor there. It would not save her from her current problem.

The sudden heavy fall of footsteps alerted her that she was about to have a visitor. The duke? She would like to box his ears if he so much as came close to her this time. It seemed she was capable of some violence, after all.

She clutched the tray tighter.

A moment later, a key turned in the lock and the door swung open.

A tall, lean figure with a mop of brown hair and brown eyes appeared in the doorway. His gaze searched the room before it settled on her, where she sat on the floor. Then his lips stretched into a wide grin.

Her eyes narrowed on the man. "And who might you be?"

She had her suspicions.

"Ah, yes, that's right. We have never been properly introduced. Allow me the pleasure. I am Lord Jonathan Griffin," he made a sweeping bow, "and I am delighted to meet the woman my brother has captured for my wife."

I knew it.

So this was Lord Jonathan Griffin.

The duke's wayward brother.

Spare to the heir.

Her intended fiancé.

"Come to inspect the merchandise?"

If anything, his smile broadened. "In a manner of speaking . . . I have come to see whether you are just as defiant as the new duchess." He gave her a crooked grin. "I see that you are."

"I'm glad I can amuse you."

Holly watched as he leaned back against the wall, his arms crossing over his chest as he studied her. He was young but powerfully built. Quick wit shown out from his eyes, as did good humor.

Overall, though, her largest impression was simply how unlike his sibling he was. In fact, had Holly met him first, say in a few years' time, he might very well have been a man she might have come to admire.

Well, if she'd never spent time with Brahm, that is. Now all she could think about was that he hadn't shut the door.

"The entirety of the situation amuses me," Lord Jonathan began. "I came as soon as I received word of my brother's upcoming nuptials. Unfortunately, the weather in Scotland took a turn for the worse, and I was delayed. I did, however, arrive in the nick of time to discover my brother wedded to the wrong woman."

"*Wrong* is a poor choice of word," Holly snapped.

"But correct, isn't it? Nonetheless, I was shocked to discover my brother planned retribution—to marry off his former betrothed to me."

"Not keen for second helpings, I take it?"

"Not keen to marry—not yet."

Holly's head perked up at that, and a seed of light sprouted in her chest. Not hope, precisely, but something else, like a bud, which might

yet blossom into hope. "I suppose this is where you stand aside and tell me to run for it?"

His laughter rang through the room. "Would you trust me if I said yes?" He motioned to the tray clutched in her hands. "Whack me over the head for good measure, heh?"

Holly's face flamed.

He chuckled. "Thought so."

"I may be a prisoner of your brother, Lord Jonathan, and so far my attempts to escape have been futile, but I refuse to lie down and await my fate like some docile creature."

He shifted on his legs, his nose wrinkling. "*Fate*. I have always despised that word. It suggests I have no control over my future."

"Then you and your brother are more alike than I first thought."

He gave her a wolfish grin. "On the contrary, my dear, I have never enjoyed captive birds. I find beautiful creatures should not be caged. It is why I am here—to set you free."

Holly's eyes widened in disbelief. That tiny bud was blossoming in her chest when another thought struck her. What if this was a trick to test her? Yes, that must be it. For when something sounded too good to be true, it usually was—and it often came along with a harsh lesson. The bud closed again.

"I see you do not believe me."

Holly rose to her feet. "Of course I do not. With your family, one never knows quite where you stand or what motives are behind your actions. For you to set me free from the mad clutches of your brother would mean you go against his wishes. I find it hard to believe that you, knowing him your entire life, would defy him."

Lord Jonathan nodded in thought, pushing back from the wall. "Here is the thing, Miss Middleton. My brother does not scare me as much as your sister does."

"Willow?" Holly asked, confused.

He nodded. "My lovely sister-in-law is quite the force to be reckoned with. I believe Ambrose will have a hard time controlling his new wife. In fact, for that very reason, I have decided to stick around."

Holly arched a brow. "That gives me more pleasure than you can know."

He winked at her. "And just so you know, Miss Middleton, if I were up for marrying at present or if someone else had not already staked his claim in a rather adamant fashion, I would have been happy to court you. I find you Middletons bold, and it's terribly engaging, I must say."

Holly scrunched her brows together. "I'm afraid I do not understand. Who staked a claim on me?"

“That surly beast of yours—Warton, I believe?—is on the warpath.”

Brahm knew the duke had her? How?

“The marquis staked no claim,” she denied.

“No? He quite boldly declared his intentions, and let’s not forget the part where he threatened to disembowel me if I married you. I rather enjoy my private parts intact.” He shuddered.

Holly blinked and then choked back a laugh. Brahm had threatened Lord Jonathan?

A thrill of pleasure shot through her. A man would not defend a woman in such a way if he did not care for her. He must carry some affection for her, then.

“He has a temper,” Holly agreed.

Lord Jonathan snorted. “A temper results in fisticuffs, not threats to castrate.”

All the more reason to love Brahm more.

“But what of your brother, the duke? Surely his wrath is not worth the betrayal.”

“My brother has lost his mind. In any case, I believe Ambrose is about to discover just how inconvenient it is to continually meddle in the lives of others.”

“Would he harm my sister?”

“I would not worry about your sister; she’s quite the hellcat if she doesn’t get what she wants.”

Holly laughed. “I’m sure she would enjoy that reference immensely,” she murmured with wry amusement. But with his words came relief. She had been so worried that she had ruined her sister’s life, but this was confirmation rather than just hope that Willow had her marriage well enough in hand. “Are you not mad at me for jilting your brother?”

He shrugged. “On the contrary, it gives me great delight. The day he ventured into Middleton domain was a great day indeed. Though, had it transpired differently . . . well, I might feel otherwise.”

Holly nodded. Willow had well and truly saved their family by marrying the duke in her place. No one was jilted, and it appeared, if Lord Jonathan was to be understood, that his brother had met his match.

“You are a rogue, are you not?”

Lord Jonathan leaned forward, as if to impart a great secret, his eyes sparkling with mirth. “The secret to being a rogue is to not admit one is a rogue, for that would defeat the entire purpose of being a rogue.”

Holly shook her head. The lord had charm, for certain, but she had come to prefer the brooding sort.

“Do you believe your brother will forgive us in time?” she

murmured after a moment.

“I believe,” he said, considering his words before he continued, “given that Warton threatened to disembowel him and me, Ambrose will come to see the light eventually. Warton is not an enemy you want at your back.”

“He threatened the duke as well?”

Lord Jonathan nodded. “I thought that Warton was full of bluster, but then I saw a powerful group of individuals at his back.”

This time hope did not blossom, it soared. The man she loved had not abandoned her. He was fighting for her.

“Surely your brother has powerful friends as well?” she asked.

“Oh, yes, though it is curious why he hasn’t rallied them to his side.”

Curious, indeed.

“Wait, so everyone knows about my relationship with Warton?”

“It would appear so.” Amusement sparked in his gaze.

Dear Lord. She did not know whether that was a nightmare or a relief.

A sudden idea occurred to her.

“Lord Jonathan, perhaps I can prevail upon you to aid me with something.”

“I’m all ears, Miss Middleton.”

“Please, call me Holly; we are family now, after all.”

“No need to remind me. I shall be the uncle that regales my nephews and nieces with the tale of how the duke once attempted to marry me, his brother, to his sister-in-law,” he teased. “Tell me what you require, Holly.”

“I need to pin a card.”

“Might I inquire as to the nature of this card?” Jonathan asked, his eyes flashing with good humor.

Holly’s lips stretched into a brilliant smile. “Why, indeed—it’s an invitation to marriage.”

Chapter 20

The following morning

“Shush, stop complaining. The gown will fit you if you keep still.”

Holly shot Willow a dark look in the mirror. After Jonathan had freed her, she’d asked him to take her directly to her father, who had demanded a detailed account of every moment, from the day of the wedding till the moment his brother had deposited her on their doorstep. She had then sent word to Willow, who had, to their surprise, arrived that evening.

Now Holly, Willow, and Poppy stood in her bedroom fitting a gown that they had spent all night altering. Years of tedious embroidery and sewing lessons had finally come in handy.

“It is not the keeping still I am afraid of, it’s the moving around.”

“It will be fine,” Willow said.

“We shall find out soon enough. At this rate, I doubt I will be able to manage a step—my lungs will give out,” Holly muttered.

“So take smaller steps,” Willow murmured.

“There is no time to alter the dress further,” Poppy said.

Holly maintained a stiff posture as her sister tugged at the laces at her lower back. This was not the dress she had envisioned for her wedding—it was even better. A soft muslin gown of forest green with gold lace trimmings. It had taken most of the night to embroider tiny leaves into the lining, and the result was a far cry from a “new breed of bird” look, as Brahm had put it.

Her hair had been expertly pinned together, and to complete the look, Poppy had stuck a twig of ivory in her hair. But the corset was much too tight. Holly had always thought the purpose of the garment was to uplift one’s charms in a comfortable manner. Nothing about

this bodice was comfortable.

“Can we not forgo the corset?”

Willow’s affronted gaze met hers. “That shall be scandalous, Holly!”

“I don’t care about scandalous, I care about breathing,” Holly pointed out. “And I am sure no one will notice I’m not wearing one.”

Willow sighed. “If you insist,” she said after a moment. “But you shall not forgo your chemise.”

“I would never dream of such a thing,” Holly teased, her hand settling over her heart.

Willow rolled her eyes, but she and Poppy quickly dispensed of the corset.

Holly inhaled deeply as she fought for breath. *Ah, that is much better.*

“You will look like a goddess of the earth,” Poppy gushed, pinning away a stray curl.

She hoped so. Her nerves were taxed with tension. Though Brahm had declared their betrothal to the entire land, she didn’t know precisely why he had. Did he love her, or did he feel a sense of duty to her? Was he saving her or choosing her? She felt exposed, like a soldier in the line of fire.

Then, to add a layer of complexity, she knew that Brahm must feel rather uncertain himself. He had risked a great deal in declaring that they were betrothed and had no idea how she would respond to such a bold declaration. So an invitation to spend their lives together seemed a fitting way to show Brahm just how much she loved him—to let him know that she would happily marry him even though he hadn’t actually asked her.

Remarkably, it felt as though her entire life had been in preparation to this day. Not her wedding, mind you, but wedding Brahm Tremont. He had not only stolen her heart—because, quite frankly, her heart had been willing enough to pounce on him—but he made her feel like more than the girl everyone else saw as just silly.

“Tell me again. Did Brahm truly threaten St. Ives?” Holly asked her sister. Until the day her hair turned silver, she would not tire of hearing that story.

Willow let out an exasperated breath. “Honestly, Holly, must you exhaust the subject?”

“The man did declare their betrothal to the entire world,” Poppy said with a shrug. “It must have come as quite the shock.”

“To us all,” Willow agreed, pulling away from her. “Are you certain this is what you want? The last time, things did not go as you had hoped.”

“And I,” Poppy piped up, “would rather not be shackled to that big beast.”

“Do not fear, dear sister, I am quite committed to this one.” Holly

grinned.

“Do not jest over such things!” Willow admonished. “But declaration or not, that still doesn’t mean you must marry him,” she pointed out.

“I love him, Willow.”

“You loved the last one, too,” Poppy muttered beneath her breath.

They both shot her an aggrieved look.

“He left you, alone, in the country,” Willow argued.

“True, but Jonathan said he looked like a man possessed.”

“That only confirms he has a conscience,” Willow said.

“Is Lord Jonathan on Warton’s side now? Did the marquis not threaten him?” Poppy asked. “And when did you become such good friends?”

“In all likelihood he fears disembowelment more than he does his brother,” Willow suggested.

The girls snickered.

“Or you,” Holly pointed out.

“Did you threaten him as well, Willow?” Poppy chirped. “I do believe you are my new idol.”

Willow blushed. “I did no such thing.”

Holly’s smile turned sly. “Jonathan called you a hellcat.”

“I am no such thing!” Willow exclaimed, her eyes wide.

Holly lifted her shoulders in a shrug. “He said he is going to stick around London for a while. He believes your marriage to his brother will provide endless entertainment.”

“The scoundrel!”

“Just where is your beloved husband?” Poppy asked Willow.

“Oh . . . well, Jonathan helped me to secure him last night.”

Poppy rolled her eyes heavenward at the mention of the duke’s rascal brother. “Am I the only one he did not befriend?”

Holly ignored her and instead asked, “Secured him how?”

Willow looked slightly abashed. “Jonathan supplied him with drink, and I tied him to a chair and locked him in his room. The servants have strict orders to stay clear of that wing.”

Holly’s jaw dropped.

“He has been tied up since last night?” Poppy asked, shocked.

Willow nodded.

“I cannot believe you did that,” Holly murmured. “St. Ives will be furious with you.”

“If he even remembers my part in his imprisonment.”

“Oh, he will,” Poppy said in an ominous tone. “That man does not strike me as one who forgets anything.”

“You should be careful, Willow,” Holly agreed, “not to push him too far. What if he thinks to punish you?”

Willow shook her head. "Ambrose knows better."

But Holly caught the slight line of worry in her features. St. Ives might not take it out on her, but it would not be a pleasant rant to witness.

"Are you certain?" Holly had to ask.

"Do not worry so. Ambrose and I understand one another. In any case, let us not go on about me; today is about you."

Holly sighed, letting it go. She trusted Willow. And it was true; today was about her. Although, in some ways, it was not. Every event that had led to this day had started with her accepting a proposal from a duke. So, in part, it wasn't just her day. It was Willow's day as well. It was St. Ives's day. It was Brahm's day. It was Poppy's and her father's day. It marked not only the beginning of her future with a remarkable man but also the end of the events that had unfolded prior to it.

Suddenly nervous, Holly glanced around the room. "Do you think he really wants to marry me?"

"The man declared his intentions publicly. He wants to marry you, all right," Willow said earnestly.

"After his passionate display at the Eldridge ball, you are all but already married." Poppy smiled with amusement. "On a further note, who is that delicious-looking man guarding the doors at the front?" Poppy asked.

"Marcus Hunt," Willow said and eyed her sister with a raised brow. "He is a Bow Street Runner."

"A damn fine one."

"Poppy!" Willow admonished.

Holly grinned. "Marcus Hunt has been loitering about all morning. He wishes to ask me some questions, but I haven't had the time to see to him. Jonathan said he would see to it."

"Why do I feel every sentence either starts or ends with Jonathan?" Poppy gave an exaggerated sigh.

"He is family," Willow pointed out.

"Yes, well, I'd much rather talk about the scrumptious Bow Street Runner," Poppy drawled with dreamy eyes.

"Do keep in mind that it is Holly's wedding day."

"Of course," Poppy murmured. "And I cannot believe I'm attending another one of your weddings."

Willow covered her mouth with her hand and smothered a laugh.

"This one will be the last, I promise," Holly muttered, her gaze darting to the door.

"I am thrilled to hear that, although now I shall be left as the only one unwed. How positively uninspiring."

"You will find someone," Willow murmured. "Just be patient and

leave the Bow Street Runners alone.”

Poppy wrinkled her nose. “Patience has never been one of my virtues. And since all the good bachelors have been snatched up, I suppose I will have to settle for Mr. Hunt.”

“Not all the bachelors have been snatched up,” Holly felt compelled to point out. “There are still a few reformable rakes left untouched.”

“Not anyone worthy of my time.”

“You are so bad,” Willow murmured.

“I do not see how I am bad when all I ask for is a handsome gentleman who will conquer worlds for me.”

“Worlds?” Holly winked at Willow. “And here I thought there was only one.”

“A figure of speech,” Poppy said with a wave of her hand. “So how will we know when your future husband arrives?”

“I suppose when he bursts through the door bellowing my name.”

Willow snickered.

“The man does seem to do things in a loud manner.”

A smile spread across Holly’s lips. He surely did. And the continued silence of him not bellowing out her name was nerve-racking. Her palms were all sweaty, and her heart fluttered in her chest every time a door slammed in the distance. Where was he?

“Oh, no! It’s raining!” Poppy suddenly exclaimed in horror.

Holly whirled around to catch her sister leaning out of the window, looking up at the sky.

“Drat! This won’t do! We must rescue the cake, or all our effort will be for naught!” Poppy exclaimed.

Willow dashed from the room, shouting over her shoulder, “Don’t move, Holly! I shall be back shortly!”

Poppy darted from the room in pursuit, leaving Holly standing alone, staring after them, nonplussed. A little rain was nothing to be concerned about; they could just as easily marry before a cozy fire in the drawing room.

She turned back to study her reflection in the mirror. She felt like a different person from the one who had left London in a mad dash alongside the marquis. Wiser. More at ease with herself.

Her hand lifted to settle on her chest, where her heart beat the strongest. She also felt stronger, braver.

Another door slammed in the distance.

Again, her heart fluttered in her chest.

Chapter 21

Brahm stared at the invitation that had been delivered to him an hour ago. For what must be the twelfth time, he rubbed his thumb over the excellent quality paper the size of a calling card. It wasn't like any invitation he had ever received, and he'd been staring at it since it had arrived, trying to figure out whether it was a trick or real.

A wedding invitation.

For one thing, there was no bloody name on it. Who had sent it? Who was getting married? Holly, for certain, but there was a big question mark regarding the groom. What if he arrived only to witness her being ushered down the aisle to marry Lord Jonathan?

He'd murder the whelp.

Dammit. He was uncertain whether this was a gesture of mockery from St. Ives or one in earnest. Rage and fear simmered beneath the surface at the idea of losing her.

Eleven o'clock.

Brahm glanced at his pocket watch. It was now ten thirty.

He ran his hand over his face, studying the card. The address caused him to pause.

21 Tuner Street, Mayfair.

The address belonged to Charles Middleton, not St. Ives. But that didn't mean this wasn't a ruse of sorts.

He stared at the plain, printed white card, tracing a trembling finger over her name. Holly Middleton.

Could it be real? And if it were real, what the hell was the meaning of it? A proposal? For him? What kind of proposal was this, in any case? Had whoever sent this completely lost their senses? He had already declared him and Holly engaged. Moreover, if it were real, did that mean that Holly was no longer held captive by the duke?

Had she escaped? Had the duked released her? Had she sent this invitation? Why wouldn't she send word?

Brahm hardly recalled how he had come to stand before 21 Turner Street. But now that he was there, he debated the merits of kicking down the damn door.

Somewhere in this house, if this invitation was to be believed, Holly resided. That fact allowed him to draw the strength to be calm.

So he knocked.

And waited.

And then, as if his confusion wasn't enough, the darkened clouds above him opened up and showered him, and all of London, with pouring rain.

And still he waited.

And waited.

And waited.

With a growl of impatience, his hand settled on the door just as it swung open to reveal Lord Jonathan.

Brahm uttered an oath.

The dandy stood in the doorway, impeccably dressed in a bold green jacket and navy breeches, whereas Brahm had not even bothered with a coat. He wore only a white shirt, soaked and clinging to his skin, and cream breeches, also drenched.

"Ah, Warton, I was wondering when you'd arrive," Lord Jonathan said. There was no mockery in the man's voice but for a flash of amusement.

Brahm saw red.

Without thought or word, he grabbed the man by the lapels and shoved him inside. Lord Jonathan flew back, crashing to the ground. A few feet away, a footman dropped a tray of champagne in fright, the noise startling two maids.

"Where is she?" Brahm growled, uncaring of anything else. He grasped the man again, hauling him up. "I told you if you married her I would disembowel you!"

Marcus Hunt appeared from nowhere, pulling Brahm away from Lord Jonathan with some effort. Few matched Brahm's height and built, and Hunt was not as big or quite as tall, but the Runner packed some deceptive strength in his muscle.

"Hell, man, get it together," Hunt hissed in his ear.

He jerked away from Hunt when a flurry of skirts entered his peripheral vision.

Brahm turned toward the stairs, and his eyes found her instantly. Like the radiant sun, she beckoned him. He inhaled a sharp breath. And for a moment, he couldn't move, could only stare.

A week ago he would never have imagined they could match so

perfectly together. Now Brahm could hardly maintain himself when she was not by his side. All he wanted to do was kiss her.

Her eyes darted to Lord Jonathan and Hunt before settling on him again, and Brahm held his breath.

Then she smiled—a full stretch of her lips that transformed her entire face.

Brahm could not tear his eyes away. She looked ravishing, downright beddable. But then he recalled who opened the door, and his eyes narrowed.

Her sisters, in a whirl of satin skirts, suddenly entered the hall, their collective gasps causing him to flinch.

“Oh!” Willow exclaimed, her brows knitting together as her gaze traveled over his soaked attire.

“I daresay you were right,” Poppy murmured. “We would know his arrival by a bellow or two.”

Brahm shook his head and strode toward Holly, stopping at the edge of the staircase. They needed to talk. This instant.

“You came,” she whispered. Her expression was soft, her eyes luminous.

Brahm arched a thick brow, searching her face. Of course he came. Nothing would have kept him away. Nothing except for her.

His gaze roved her face. “You sent this?” He held up the invitation.

“You don’t know,” she murmured, lowering her lashes.

Beneath his skin, his pulse leaped. It was not a no but not a yes either.

“I know you are not hidden away, as I first believed.”

“Lord Jonathan let me out.”

The words were like a fire poker, jabbing at his gut. Dammit! She could either break him or calm the storm inside of him.

“When you left me—”

“I never left you,” Brahm interrupted with a scowl. “I returned that same day.”

“After I was taken by the duke’s men, yes.”

“I haven’t stopped searching for you since then.” That ought to count for something.

“I waited for days.”

Brahm placed one boot on the first step, then another and another until he loomed over her. “I was working on a plan.”

A faint smile graced her mouth. “So I hear.”

He leaned closer. “What did you hear?”

“Jonathan told me of your threats.”

His innards lurched at her use of the boy’s Christian name. His shoulders expanding even more, he prepared for her next blow. “Are you wedding him? Have you decided to follow the duke’s decree?”

The tip of her tongue darted between her lips as she licked her mouth. "That is the most absurd thing you have said so far!"

His gaze lowered to her rosy, plump, kissable lips. "You are wearing matching outfits."

"Do not be silly!" She glanced at Jonathan and slanted a devilish brow. "That is purely coincidence."

"Coincidence my ass."

"Has it not occurred to you that he may not wish to marry me?"

He pressed his nose against hers. "No. What man wouldn't want to spend the rest of his life with you?"

Her lips parted and shut again. "Lord, you are vexing at times." Her smile was brilliant and openly amused. "The only man I wish to marry is you."

Raw emotion seared his soul. She wanted to marry him. That thought dominated his mind, making it impossible to think, impossible to breathe.

"I cannot believe you thought the invitation was for Jonathan and me." Her gaze was bright with astonishment.

"Woman, I do not like that man's name on your lips." With the chastening arch of one brow, he lifted the card to her face. "And neither does your invitation mention anything about the groom."

"Because you are the groom. I thought that was clear."

"Not clear enough."

But Brahm's body was relaxing, responding to the affection in her voice.

"Well, in any case, the duke is tied up at the moment, so of course it's meant for us. Jona—ahem—Lord Jonathan assisted Willow in securing him." She tilted her head to the side, resting a hand on his chest. Brahm felt her touch to the bone. "And he told me about how you declared our engagement to the entire world."

Tied up?

Brahm grunted. That didn't matter right now. What did matter was that he hadn't thought she would find out about his declaration until after he had time to explain his reasoning along with his actions—privately.

"Are you angry?" she asked.

"I ought to be," he grumbled. "Not only have you stolen my very existence, but you have now also robbed me of my chance to ask you for your hand in marriage."

Her eyes rounded and her lips parted just enough for him to imagine all the things he'd love to do with that mouth. "How does one go about thieving someone's existence?"

"You snatch up my heart the moment I let my guard down," he growled, seizing her around the waist and dragging her up against

him.

His lips crashed down on hers for a scorching kiss.

On and on he kissed her, until the front of her gown was as soaked as he was. Until her arms encircled his neck and she kissed him back with the same heat. Blood pounded in his veins.

Vaguely, he heard someone giggle and clap her hands, another person gasp, and someone clear his throat. But nothing mattered; only Holly and that she was finally back in his arms.

When he finally summoned the strength to pull his mouth away from her—and it took all of his willpower—he winked down at her and hoisted her over his shoulder.

“Brahm,” she gasped. “You barbarian! Let me down!”

“Of course. But first, let us continue this conversation in a more,” he glanced over his shoulder, “private setting.”

And before anyone could protest, he took the stairs two at a time.

Chapter 22

Brahm set her down once they were in a private drawing room, safely locked away from prying eyes. He still couldn't believe she was here, with him. Everything he never knew he wanted, so close, staring up at him with such affection that he could scarcely draw air into his lungs.

He didn't dare move as she reached up to trace his jawline with a soft, delicate finger.

"You love me?" she asked once he had set her down, her eyes searching his.

"So much it bloody hurts."

Her smile was radiant, sweet, dazzlingly bright. "Then I suppose I shall have to marry you right this moment."

"Holly, are you certain you want this? My declaration was—"

She interrupted him by placing a finger on his lips. "You are exactly what I want."

He nipped at the digit with his teeth.

Thunder rolled in the distance, and instead of flinching, she ran her hand through his soaked hair.

His eyes narrowed on her. "You aren't frightened."

"I never was. You startled me and assumed the worst," she admitted, her smile unashamed. "I was happy to be carried up a flight of stairs in your arms."

"And what of all your little touches that drove me crazy. They weren't innocent at all."

A blush stole over her cheeks. "I wanted to make you see what I already knew: that we were meant to be together. I needed some way for you to see me as more than someone to protect," she admitted.

"Bloody hell," he raked a hand through his hair. "I thought I was going mad."

“My touches drove you mad with desire?”

He scowled down at her. “The bath incident?”

A glimmer of laughter lit her eyes. “That was entirely accidental.”

“I cannot believe I did not see it,” he muttered, more to himself than to her.

“Does it bother you?”

His eyes ensnared hers. This newfound revelation that she had pursued him intentionally without him being the wiser ought to have bothered him, but strangely, it did not. Instead, her actions made him want her all the more.

“It appears I am to marry the craftiest woman in London. I do believe I will love every moment of it.”

When pure joy brightened her features, Brahm realized he would cite all the damn love poems in the world to always see that look on her face.

“I am quite the thief these days, aren’t I?” she replied.

Yes, she was, but right now he was far too busy noticing every small detail of her to reply—like how the awful coffee color had washed out of her hair and her shortened blond locks were all the same length; how her blue eyes were brighter than usual; how her beguiling angel-white teeth lit up the room.

Heart beating wildly in his chest, he traced a finger along the soft flesh of her lower lip. “You look exquisite. Did I mention that?”

“I’m not even done dressing.”

“I don’t care.” He inhaled a deep breath. “From the moment I discovered you were taken, I told myself I would do anything to get you back. And now that you are here . . .” Words failed him. Emotion clogged his throat.

“How about you kiss me again?” she said with a wicked grin, and to his surprise, she tugged on his shirt until they were pressed firmly up against each other.

“I don’t think that that’s a good idea.”

“Why not.” Her voice was breathless.

Dear Christ. He swallowed. “I’d do more than kiss you. I’d want to feast my eyes over every inch of your body.”

And so much more. He wanted to claim her—fully. He wanted to claim her so that when she stood before him and the priest, there would be no doubt in anyone’s mind that she belonged to him.

He could wait no longer, had fantasized about this moment—her lips swollen from his kisses, her body spent from his loving—since he first saw her dressed in nothing but her chemise in the secret passageway of the church.

Her eyes darted around the room. “Here?”

She sounded so intrigued that Brahm allowed his eyes to smolder

with the lust he felt for her.

In response, she clutched her dress more tightly against her. "We are to be married in a few moments . . ."

When she backed up, Brahm's arm snaked out, and he hauled her against him. "I would trail my tongue down the hollow of your neck to your collarbone."

She shivered in his arms. "Why does that sound so wickedly intriguing?"

He stared transfixed into the soft crystals of her eyes. "I don't want to leave anything up to fate. Not with your wild ways."

"Wild ways?" she teased.

"Yes, wild. You are my tempest, after all." And then he crushed his mouth down against hers.

Holly had fantasized about this moment ever since she first decided she was going to marry the Marquis of Warton. She'd quite literally dreamed of being held in his arms, her passions awakened by his kisses. Now she stood in breathless anticipation of what would happen next. And while this was in no way the perfect wedding, this moment between them was all the more perfect for it.

She had it wrong, all these years—the best relationships are not those that are created from wild fantasies but from the love that sizzles between two people.

Holly felt that sizzle now.

Her arms swept around his neck, and she pulled herself closer to his chest. Through the thin material of her gown, she felt her skin begin to dampen. She couldn't bring herself to care.

"Kiss me, Brahm."

His arms closed around her, his eyes blazing before his head bent low, their lips barely touching. "I hated the feeling of thinking I might have lost you."

Then his lips brushed over hers. Aching tender. His tongue danced with hers in ecstatic rhythm while his hand stroked down her back, past where the laces of her gown had yet to be fastened, and skimmed over her backside.

"You shall never lose me," Holly murmured against his mouth. She bit down on his lip teasingly. "Well, unless a mad duke kidnaps me again," she teased.

"Not even then. It took nearly ten years from my life when I found you gone."

"You've not aged a day."

He pulled her in for another swift kiss. "Holly, you are so much

more than I ever imagined. I will never leave your side again. And if I do, feel free to clobber me over the head.”

His words, the raw desire in his voice, struck her right in the chest. Never had any man made her feel so wanted, so cherished. She did not care that they had guests waiting below. Or that she would not get her garden wedding. All that mattered was the man standing before her.

“I want you, Brahm, here, now, forever.”

His eyes darkened. “You can’t take that back. I won’t allow you to.”

“Oh, you are quite stuck with me.”

“Thank God.”

An answering grin curled her lips. He looked magnificent, with his dark eyes and disheveled hair, his gaze boring into her with so much emotion. Heat pooled low in her belly.

His eyes never left her as he pushed down her gown. One finger at a time, Holly let the material slide from her fingers. His eyes feasted on her, and Holly felt herself flush beneath his hot gaze. Dexterous fingers tugged on her chemise until that, too, pooled at her feet, and she stood naked before him.

A gasp drew from her lips.

Holly couldn’t tear her gaze away from him. The emotion flickering across his face held her paralyzed. Fiery shivers traveled the length of her spine.

He sunk down to his knees before her, stripping off his shirt and tossing it aside, the muscles in his arms rippling with each movement.

It was unbearably arousing.

Everything inside her ignited into a heated blaze. His chest was solid, smooth. She wanted so desperately to touch him. So she did. She brushed her palm across his heart, entranced by the feel of his skin.

He trembled at the contact, and she had no more chance to explore. Powerful arms swept her up high. She was dimly aware of passing furniture before she felt the surface of the piano beneath her.

Her lashes fluttered as she lifted them to meet his gaze. “This is so wicked.”

His lips captured hers. He kissed every inch of her mouth. And as promised, he made his way down the soft arch of her neck, his tongue skimming over her collarbone before outlining the tender curve of her breast. A half-strangled moan left her lips as she felt him take a hard bud into his mouth and begin to suckle, his free hand kneading her other exposed breast.

Her head fell back. The movement thrust her breasts forward, and his low groan tickled against her skin.

“You are so soft,” he responded in a strained whisper, retaking her

mouth in a rapturous kiss.

The warm scrape of his tongue enticed a low moan from her, and she writhed against him, seeking more. In answer to her silent plea, his hand left her breast to explore her body further, caressing her skin as his mouth trailed kisses from her bottom lip down to her neckline. It was almost too much for her. Her entire body was alive with need. A burning sensation wound up deep inside of her.

And then his hand was between her thighs, the place no other man had ever touched. He stroked her tender flesh with his thumb, a finger slipping inside of her moist heat.

Moaning, she curled her fingers desperately into his hair. Tension wound tight in her core. All her life she had searched for someone to share the perfect life with, the perfect man and the perfect circumstances, never quite knowing that perfect was the last thing she hungered for.

Her whole body felt ablaze. She wanted him inside her, needed him inside her, had to become one with him.

His finger flexed, gliding in and out, while his thumb stroked the most sensitive part of her. His mouth moved from one breast to the other, his teeth grazing a nipple.

“Brahm, please,” she pleaded.

“I love how you are so ready for me, sweetheart.”

“Are you done?”

Laughter stirred in his chest. “No.” His eyes pinned her to the piano. “I will never be done.”

He pulled his hand from between her legs and unbuttoned his breeches, pushing them down.

Holly had seen Brahm naked before, but this, this was entirely different. It seemed bigger than before. And much harder. “Oh! But that is . . . I . . . you . . .”

He smiled in a way that made her heart stutter.

“I love that expression on your face.”

He leaned over her and captured her parted lips in a kiss, the head of his member pressing into her slick entrance. He pushed gently at first, so lovingly, and Holly wriggled her hips to urge him on.

“Hurry.”

His teeth grazed the lobe of her ear. “It will hurt the first time.”

“I don’t care.”

Sure enough, his cock burned inside her as he pushed deeper, her muscles clamping around it, but Holly didn’t care. She clasped her legs around his waist.

“Holly,” he groaned, burying his face in her neck.

She sucked in a startled gasp when, with one deep thrust, he passed the veil of her innocence, her body stretching to accommodate him.

“Are you all right? Should I stop?” Brahm stared down her, his eyes bright in his flushed face.

“Do not dare.”

She reached around his back and pulled him tighter against her. He groaned and began to move, and at first, there was a slight pinch of pain, but the discomfort soon receded. His thrusts grew stronger and deeper, setting a slow rhythmic pace, and she clasped his massive shoulders for support.

His breathing was labored, and Holly knew it took all his strength to be gentle with her. A rush of emotion assailed her. She tightened her hips and flexed, meeting his pace with the same urgency she felt in him.

He growled and dragged her bottom closer to the edge of the piano and spread her legs wider, pushing her harder as his pace turned to quick, urgent thrusts.

Holly had never imagined anything so erotic. Not even in her wildest dreams, her most vivid fantasies, had she envisioned such wondrous pleasure. Every moment in her life paled in comparison to this one with Brahm. She gripped his shoulders tighter, her nails biting into his skin, her breasts arching against his chest, hungrily searching for the fireworks that he'd made her feel before.

His grip on her waist tightened as he drove them higher with hard, insistent strokes. She bucked wildly against him. A thousand sensations exploded inside her all at once. The climax was stronger than her first one, a wave of pleasure slamming into her with such an unexpected force that she cried out his name.

He let out a hoarse cry, plunging deeper into her heat, and then he held. Shudders rocked him, and he gathered her into his arms, his breathing ragged in her ear.

Tenderly, Holly stroked his back with her fingers, resting her head on his shoulder. It took a moment for the thrills of their climax to pass and their breathing to ease.

Then, without warning, he lifted her up into his arms and moved to the sofa, his arm snatching out to grab a forgotten coverlet draped over one of the chairs. Rain poured down in an endless stream outside the windows as they settled into the soft pillows.

“Do you think they started the celebration without us?” Holly murmured, tracing a finger over the damp droplets on Brahm's chest.

“Please tell me you did not invite the whole of London.” His lips drifted over her face.

“Only a few select friends and family.”

“Good, then it doesn't matter what they do.” He kissed the edge of her jawline.

Holly raised her hand to the dark bristle of his cheek. “No doubt

everyone will be beside themselves when they learn of how the bride and groom disappeared for hours before the ceremony, only to get married all sweaty from their steamy lovemaking.”

“Do you care what they think?”

“Not in the least, but I do hope they leave us some cake.”

A frown knit his brows. “This isn’t the wedding you deserve or the one you imagined as a little girl.”

“No,” Holly agreed. A rush of love nearly overwhelmed her at the regret she heard in his voice. She never wanted to hear that tone from him again. “It’s even better.”

Brahm’s chest rose and fell in a long, deep breath.

In the distance a door crashed against a wall and a flurry of activity erupted from somewhere in the house. Their gaze locked.

“Do you think that is the duke?” Holly asked.

Brahm rolled her over and covered her body with his, bracing himself on his forearms and staring down at her.

“I think I don’t care.” He kissed away the lines that appeared on her brow. “It will be a cold day in hell before he rips the woman I love from my arms again.”

A slow smile spread across her face. She could feel his heart pounding against her ribs. “I do so love the sound of that.” She kissed his shoulder and wrapped her arms around him. “I so love you.”

Brahm grinned and nuzzled her neck. “Woman, you have thoroughly corrupted me.”

“Well, it is about time someone took it upon themselves to do it.”

He chuckled and pulled the coverlet down to her waist.

“What are you doing?” Holly asked, startled when he kissed her between the legs, his hands holding her in place. “You cannot do that!”

A knock on the door halted any further protest.

“Holly?” It was Poppy. “Is everything all right?”

Oh, dear Lord!

“Yes,” Holly croaked, her eyes widening at Brahm as she tried to wriggle away from him. His arms tightened. “We will be right down,” she called, breathless as his tongue kept licking over the folds of her sex.

Holly whimpered.

“Holly?”

Her fingers tightened in Brahm’s hair. “We are just discussing some of the, er, finer points of our union.”

“Right,” her sister said through the door. “Well, I will inform Willow that you will be down momentarily, then.”

He slid a finger inside her.

“Brahm. We ought to—attend—wedding,” she stammered but did

not attempt to stop him when, drawing her legs farther apart, he licked and sucked until he found the spot that made her jump and focused there. Heat pooled between her legs, and she could feel herself nearing the peak of unbound pleasure again.

“Brahm,” she breathed, just as she splintered into a thousand exquisite pieces.

They did not attend their wedding until much, much later.

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SWEPT AWAY BY A WILD LORD
(A NOVELLA)

SWEPT AWAY BY A WICKED ROGUE
(A NOVELLA)

AN INVITATION TO MARRIAGE



COMING SOON

THE PERKS OF BEING A DUCHESS

A GYPSY IN SCOTLAND

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tanya Wilde developed a passion for reading when she had nothing better to do than lurk in the library during her lunch breaks. Her love affair with pen and paper followed soon after she had devoured all of the library's historical romance books!

When she's not meddling in the lives of her characters or drinking copious amounts of coffee, she's off on adventures with her partner in crime.

Wilde lives in a town at the foot of the Outeniqua Mountains, South Africa.